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KING CONAN™

Stan Lee PRESENTS:
KING CONAN
Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD
THE HAUNTER OF THE CENOTAPH
IN NEMEDIA, EAST OF KING CONAN'S AQUILONIA, THERE LIES A SHADOW-MANTLED LANE CLOSELY FLANKED BY ALTERNATING TREES AND STATUES, EACH MIGHTY OF STATURE AND BROODING OF MIEN.
THOUGH WHISPERED TALES OF THE PLACE ARE RIFE, SELDOM IS ITS DREAD LENGTH VENTURED. TONIGHT, HOWEVER, LOW MOON AND LURID TORCH UNITE TO CONQUER THE CANOPY OF DARKNESS...
CAREFUL--THESE CURSED CASKS ARE SLIPPERY.
AND WELL THEY SHOULD BE--STILL SLIMED AS THEY ARE WITH THE MUD OF THE GRAVE.
... AND THE CRUEL, UNSEEING EYES OF ANCIENT WARRIORS BEAR MUTE WITNESS TO A MYSTERIOUS PROCESSION.
DOUG MOENCH WRITER / ALAN KUPPERBERG ARTISTS · EMBELLISHER / ERNIE CHAN / R. PARKER & J. CHIANG, letters / G. ROUSSOS COLORS / LOUISE JONES EDITOR / JIM SHOOTER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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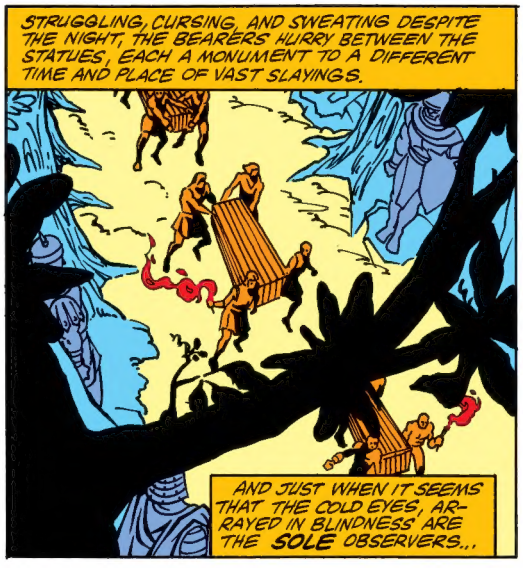
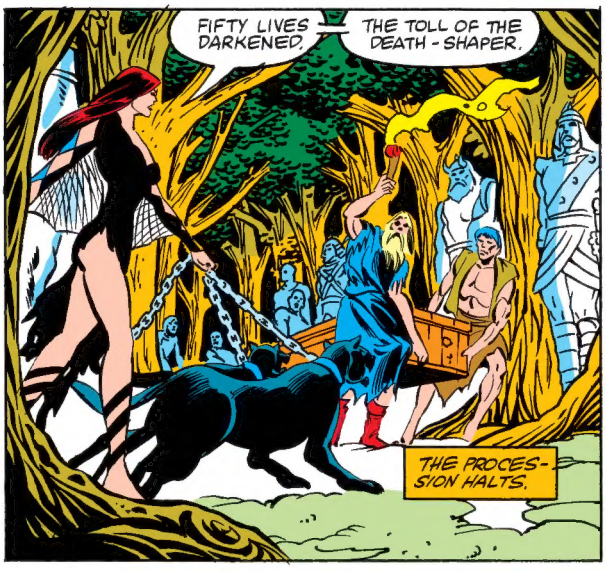
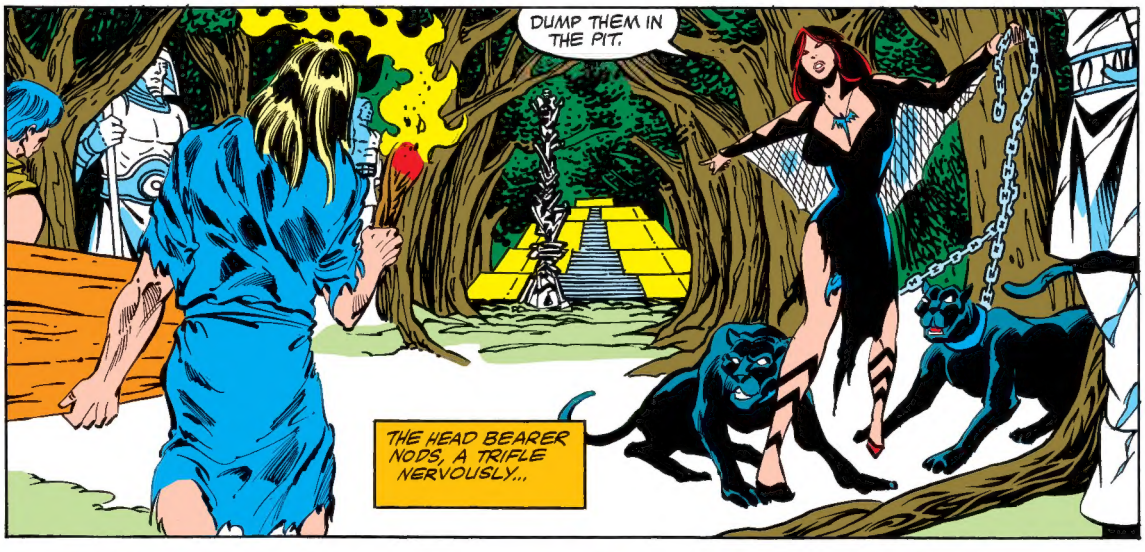
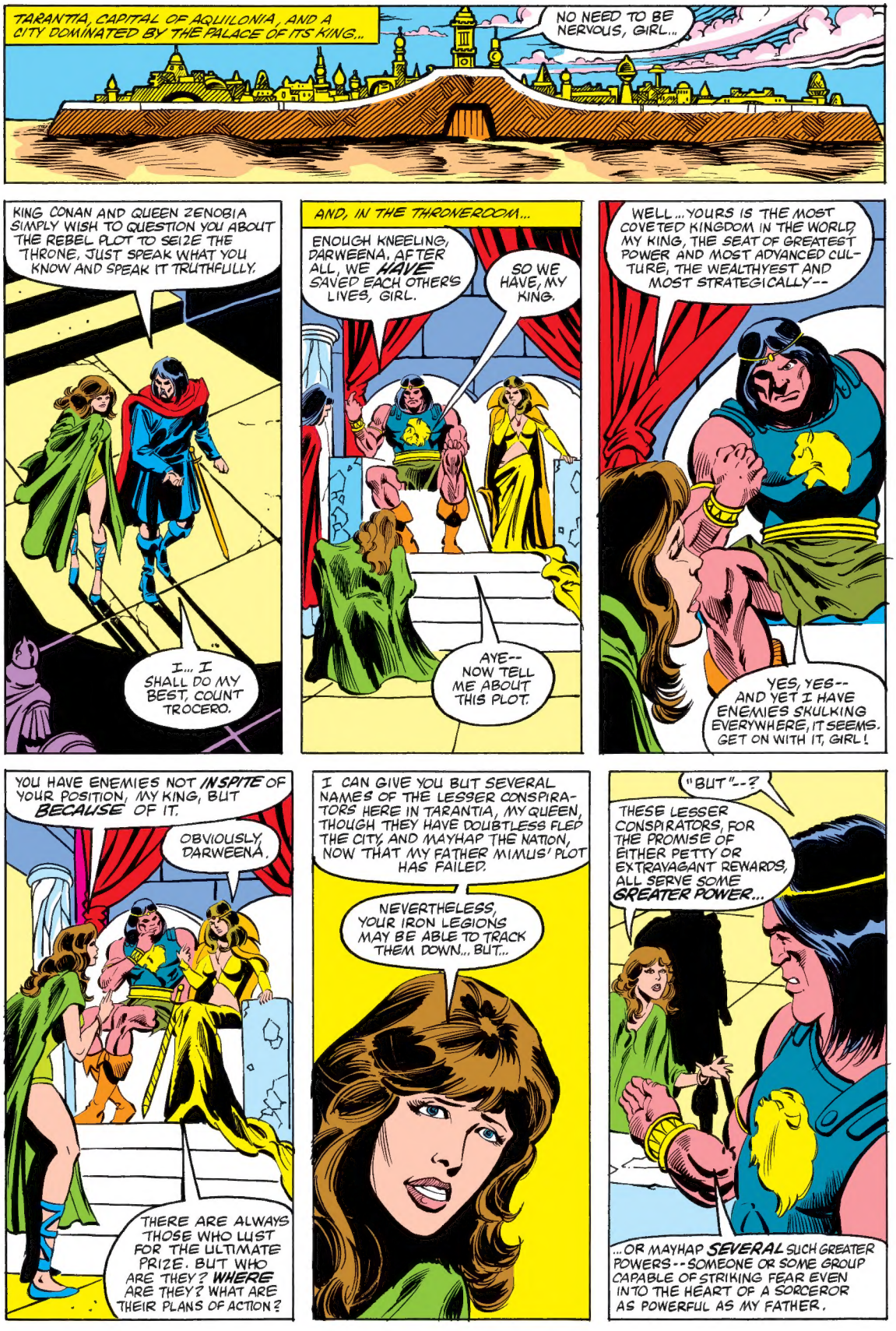

STRUGGLING, CURSING, AND SWEATING DESPITE THE NIGHT, THE BEARERS HURRY BETWEEN THE STATUES, EACH A MONUMENT TO A DIFFERENT TIME AND PLACE OF VAST SLAYINGS.
AND JUST WHEN IT SEEMS THAT THE COLD EYES, ARRAYED IN BLINDNESS ARE THE SOLE OBSERVERS...


FIFTY LIVES DARKENED.
THE TOLL OF THE DEATH-SHAPER.
THE PROCESSION HALTS.


DUMP THEM IN THE PIT.
THE HEAD BEARER NODS, A TRIFLE NERVOUSLY...

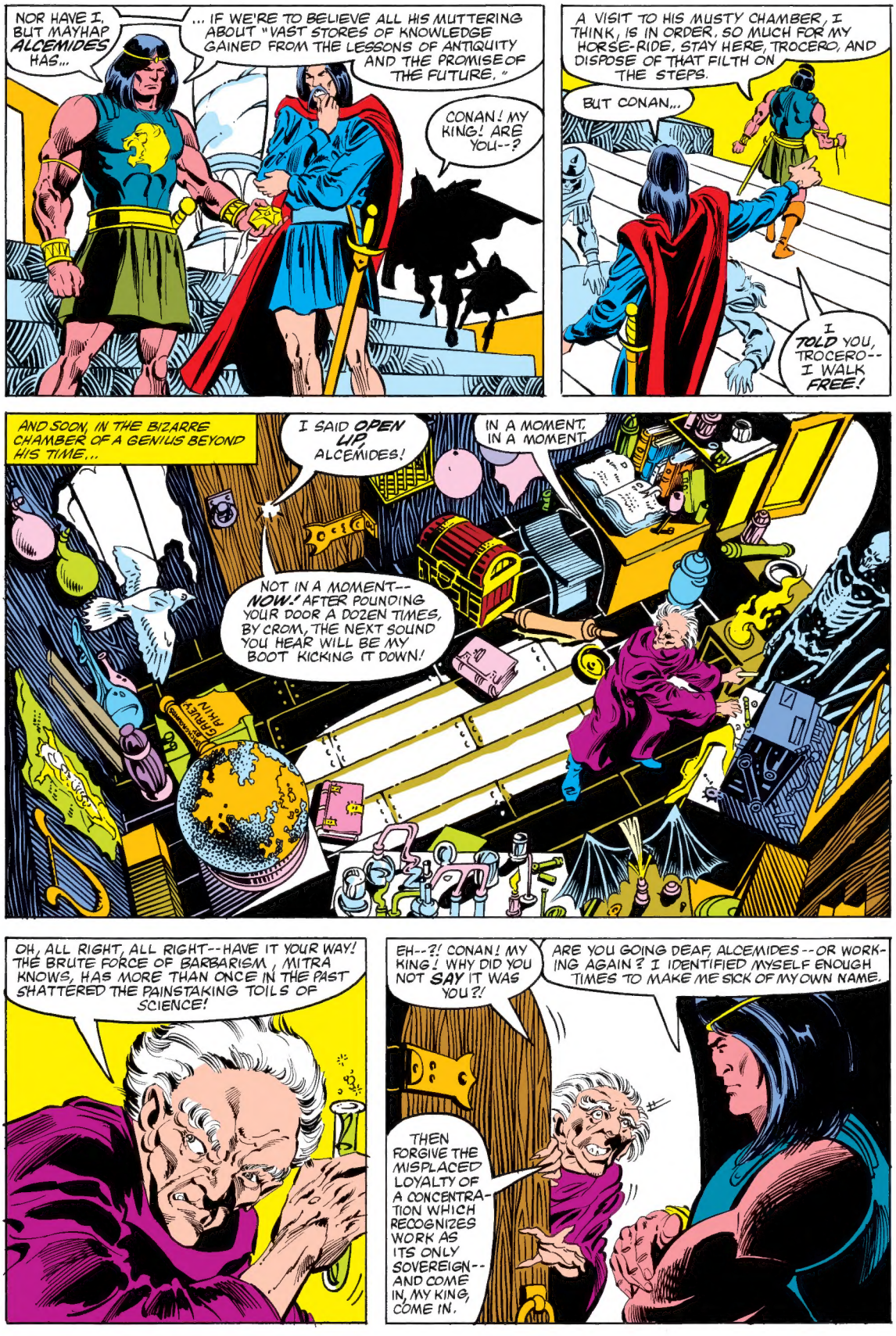
...AND HASTENS HIS FELLOWS TO OBEY CAREFUL TO GIVE THE LEASHED PANTHERS WIDE BERTH.
SOON, MY PETS...

...SOON THE LONG WAITING SHALL COME TO AN END.
OUHRR
PENTAGAR ZEX


TARANTIA, CAPITAL OF AQUILONIA, AND A CITY DOMINATED BY THE PALACE OF ITS KING...
NO NEED TO BE NERVOUS, GIRL...
KING CONAN AND QUEEN ZENOBIA SIMPLY WISH TO QUESTION YOU ABOUT THE REBEL PLOT TO SEIZE THE THRONE, JUST SPEAK WHAT YOU KNOW AND SPEAK IT TRUTHFULLY.
I... I SHALL DO MY BEST, COUNT TROCERO.
AND, IN THE THRONEROOM...
ENOUGH KNEELING, DARWEENA. AFTER ALL, WE HAVE SAVED EACH OTHER'S LIVES, GIRL.
SO WE HAVE, MY KING.
AYE-- NOW TELL ME ABOUT THIS PLOT.
WELL ...YOURS IS THE MOST COVETED KINGDOM IN THE WORLD, MY KING, THE SEAT OF GREATEST POWER AND MOST ADVANCED CULTURE, THE WEALTHYEST AND MOST STRATEGICALLY--
YES, YES-- AND YET I HAVE ENEMIES SKULKING EVERYWHERE, IT SEEMS. GET ON WITH IT, GIRL!
YOU HAVE ENEMIES NOT INSPITE OF YOUR POSITION, MY KING, BUT BECAUSE OF IT.
OBVIOUSLY, DARWEENA.
THERE ARE ALWAYS THOSE WHO LUST FOR THE ULTIMATE PRIZE. BUT WHO ARE THEY? WHERE ARE THEY? WHAT ARE THEIR PLANS OF ACTION?
I CAN GIVE YOU BUT SEVERAL NAMES OF THE LESSER CONSPIRATORS HERE IN TARANTIA, MY QUEEN, THOUGH THEY HAVE DOUBTLESS FLED THE CITY, AND MAYHAP THE NATION, NOW THAT MY FATHER MIMUS' PLOT HAS FAILED.
NEVERTHELESS, YOUR IRON LEGIONS MAY BE ABLE TO TRACK THEM DOWN... BUT...
"BUT"--?
THESE LESSER CONSPIRATORS, FOR THE PROMISE OF EITHER PETTY OR EXTRAVAGANT REWARDS, ALL SERVE SOME GREATER POWER...
...OR MAYHAP SEVERAL SUCH GREATER POWERS--SOMEONE OR SOME GROUP CAPABLE OF STRIKING FEAR EVEN INTO THE HEART OF A SORCEROR AS POWERFUL AS MY FATHER.

AND THIS GREATER POWER OR POWERS--? DO YOU KNOW WHO--
NO, COUNT TROCERO--THE KNOWLEDGE WOULD SURELY HAVE STRUCK ME DEAD LONG ERE NOW.
THEN ALL YOU CAN TELL ME, DARWEENA, IS THAT UNKNOWN JACKALS WAIT BEYOND THE CAMPFIRE...
...ONE OR MORE OF WHICH OCCASIONALLY SUMMON THE COURAGE TO MAKE A MOVE ON ME.
I AM AFRAID THAT IS THE CASE, MY KING.
I KNOW THAT YOU ARE IN GRAVE DANGER... BUT I KNOW NOT WHEN OR HOW OR IN WHAT FORM THE DANGER WILL STRIKE NEXT.
VERY WELL. ATTENDANTS-- GET THE NAMES OF THE LESSER AQUILONIAN CONSPIRATORS FROM HER--THEN LET HER GO. AND IF THE REBELS ARE STILL TO BE FOUND IN THE CITY, HAVE THEM ARRESTED.
AT ONCE, QUEEN ZENOBIA.
I NEED SOME AIR, ZENOBIA--A HARD RIDE ON A GOOD HORSE.
COME, TROCERO--WE'LL TALK ON THE WIND.
WE'VE NOT LEARNED MUCH, HAVE WE?
EVERYTHING THE GIRL KNEW, I'M SURE, CONAN.
AYE, SHE CAN BE TRUSTED, TROCERO. AND AT LEAST WE NOW KNOW THE REBEL MOVEMENT TO BE MORE WIDESPREAD THAN--
DEATH TO ALL TYRANTS! DEATH TO THE KING!
CONAN--!

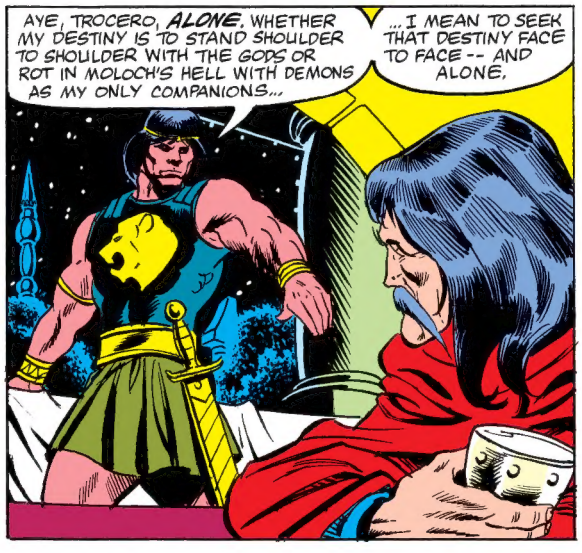
AGH-K-K
I SAW HIM TRO-CERO...
...LURKING LIKE A DOG BEHIND THE PILLAR!
I SIMPLY THOUGHT IT BETTER TO LET HIM MAKE HIS MOVE--
--THAN TO SCARE HIM OFF AND WONDER WHEN NEXT HE'D STRIKE!
BUT, CROM! WHAT HAS IT COME TO, TROCERO? BLOOD ON THE VERY PALACE STEPS?
HENCEFORTH, CONAN, I... I THINK YOU SHOULD BE SURROUNDED BY ARMED GUARDS AT ALL TIMES!
AND WORRY OVER WHICH ONE OF THE GUARDS HOLDS A DIRK LIKE HIS? NO, TROCERO, AS LONG AS THE BLOOD ON THE STEPS IS NOT MINE, I SHALL WALK A FREE MAN, SHACKLED NOT EVEN BY THE MOST COVETED THRONE IN THE WORLD..
EH--? WHAT'S THAT ABOUT HIS NECK?
SOME SORT OF MEDALLION...
HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ITS LIKE BEFORE, TROCERO?
NO... NOT WITH THE OUTER PENTAGRAM INVERTED, CONAN...

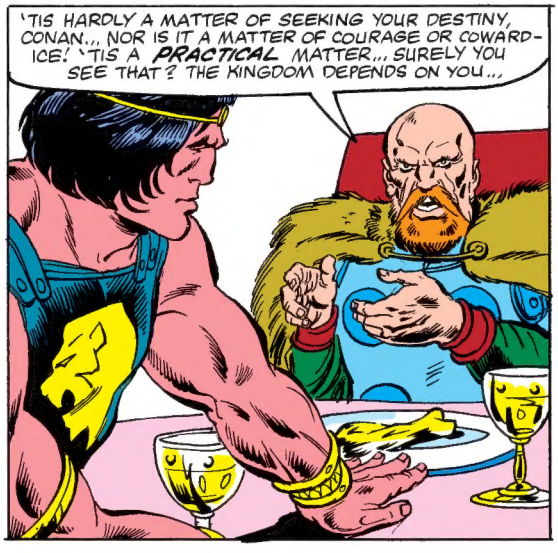

NOR HAVE I, BUT MAYHAP ALCEMIDES HAS...
... IF WE'RE TO BELIEVE ALL HIS MUTTERING ABOUT "VAST STORES OF KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM THE LESSONS OF ANTIQUITY AND THE PROMISE OF THE FUTURE."
CONAN! MY KING! ARE YOU--?
A VISIT TO HIS MUSTY CHAMBER, I THINK, IS IN ORDER. SO MUCH FOR MY HORSE-RIDE. STAY HERE, TROCERO, AND DISPOSE OF THAT FILTH ON THE STEPS.
BUT CONAN...
I TOLD YOU, TROCERO-- I WALK FREE!
AND SOON, IN THE BIZARRE CHAMBER OF A GENIUS BEYOND HIS TIME...
I SAID OPEN UP, ALCEMIDES!
IN A MOMENT. IN A MOMENT.
NOT IN A MOMENT-- NOW! AFTER POUNDING YOUR DOOR A DOZEN TIMES, BY CROM, THE NEXT SOUND YOU HEAR WILL BE MY BOOT KICKING IT DOWN!
OH, ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT--HAVE IT YOUR WAY! THE BRUTE FORCE OF BARBARISM, MITRA KNOWS, HAS MORE THAN ONCE IN THE PAST SHATTERED THE PAINSTAKING TOILS OF SCIENCE!
EH--?! CONAN! MY KING! WHY DID YOU NOT SAY IT WAS YOU?!
ARE YOU GOING DEAF, ALCEMIDES--OR WORKING AGAIN? I IDENTIFIED MYSELF ENOUGH TIMES TO MAKE ME SICK OF MY OWN NAME.
THEN FORGIVE THE MISPLACED LOYALTY OF A CONCENTRATION WHICH RECOGNIZES WORK AS ITS ONLY SOVEREIGN-- AND COME IN, MY KING, COME IN.

A VISIT BY THE KING IS EVER WELCOME--YOUR LAUGHTER IS AT LEAST SOFT, YOU KNOW.
OH? AND SHOULD I LAUGH AT THIS, ALCEMIDES?
WHAT IS IT?
THIS, MY KING IS EVERYTHING. IT IS THE WORLD.
THE WORLD--?
AYE--IF IT IS INDEED ROUND, AS I CONTEND, THEN THIS IS ROUGHLY HOW IT SHOULD LOOK FROM THE DISTANT SKY...
...IF ONE COULD EVER GAIN SUCH A CELESTIAL VANTAGE POINT, THAT IS.
AND WILL MAN EVER STAND WITH THE GODS, ALCEMIDES?
YES! SOMEDAY! IT IS OUR DESTINY!
OF COURSE, THERE MAY BE FAILURES ALONG THE WAY...
...FAILURES MARKED BY NEAR DESTRUCTION OF THE ENTIRE RACE OF MAN, SUCH AS OCCURRED AT LEAST SEVERAL TIMES IN THE DIM PAST. INDEED, WE ARE JUST NOW RECOVERING FROM ONE SUCH FAILURE...
YOU MEAN...
I MEAN, MY KING, THAT WE MIGHT STAND WITH THE GODS EVEN NOW--HAD SOME WRETCHED FOOL NOT CHOSEN THE WRONG PATH! BUT THE BUT THE CHANCE WILL COME ROUND AGAIN, YES...
...AND SOONER OR LATER ONE KEY MAN, OR MAYHAP EVEN WOMAN, WILL CHOOSE THE CORRECT PATH.
YOU SEE, IF MY THEORIES ARE RIGHT, THE WORLD WAS ONCE FILLED WITH MANY MARVELS OF MAN'S INVENTION--GLORIOUS KNOWLEDGE SURPASSING EVEN MY BRIGHTLY MAD DREAMS...
...AND THE WORLD SHALL BE SO FILLED AGAIN IN THE FUTURE, I CALL IT: SHIFTING CYCLES.
CONAN IS AMUSED BY THIS JAPE OF THE MAN, BUT IN A FOND, RATHER THAN MOCKING FASHION...
...AND SO IS GENUINELY TOUCHED, AS THE PHILOSPHER SLUMPS IN DEJECTION...
YES...A CYCLE OF PAST AND FUTURE GLORY... AND IN THE MEANTIME I AM LEFT TO LABOR IN THE DARK SHAMBLES IN BETWEEN... CURSED BY THE CRUEL TIMING OF MY BIRTH...
BUT... YOU CAME HERE FOR A REASON, MY KING?
AYE, ALCEMIDES...

THIS CURIOUS MEDALLION...
MOLOCH'S HELL, CONAN! WHERE DID YOU GET SUCH A THING?
FROM THE COLLAR OF A DOG WHO WISHED TO SNIFF MY BLOOD! WHY?
`TIS THE SEAL-- THE HELLISH MARK-- OF AN ANCIENT DEMON ON EARTH!
DEMON?
AYE--A MADMAN--A DESTROYER OF KNOWLEDGE! HIS NAME WAS PENTAGAR ZEX, AND HE MAY WELL HAVE BEEN ONE OF THOSE I CURSED-- A CHOOSER OF THE WRONG PATH, A BETRAYER OF MAN'S DESTINY AMONG THE GODS!
HE WAS SAID TO DWELL NOT FAR FROM HERE, THOUGH IN AGES PAST...
... AND THERE ARE THOSE, EVEN NOW, WHO FORM IN SECRET, BLASPHEMOUS CULTS TO WORSHIP HIS FOUL NAME.
NOT FAR FROM HERE, ALCEMIDES? WHERE?
BEYOND THE EASTERN MOUNTAINS, IN WESTERN NEMEDIA-- A SMALL, ALMOST FORGOTTEN CITY NAMED THALIA.
THALIA... AND YOU HAVE MAPS TO THIS PLACE?
AYE--I WILL GIVE YOU MAPS, MY KING, BUT I WARN YOU...
...THEY MAY SHOW YOU THE WAY STRAIGHT TO HADES.

THAT NIGHT AT THE PALACE SUPPER, NEVERTHELESS, CONAN ANNOUNCES HIS DECISION...
I GO TO THALIA IN NEMEDIA...TOMORROW... ALONE.
BUT MY KING--ALONE? AFTER WHAT HAPPENED EARLIER TODAY?

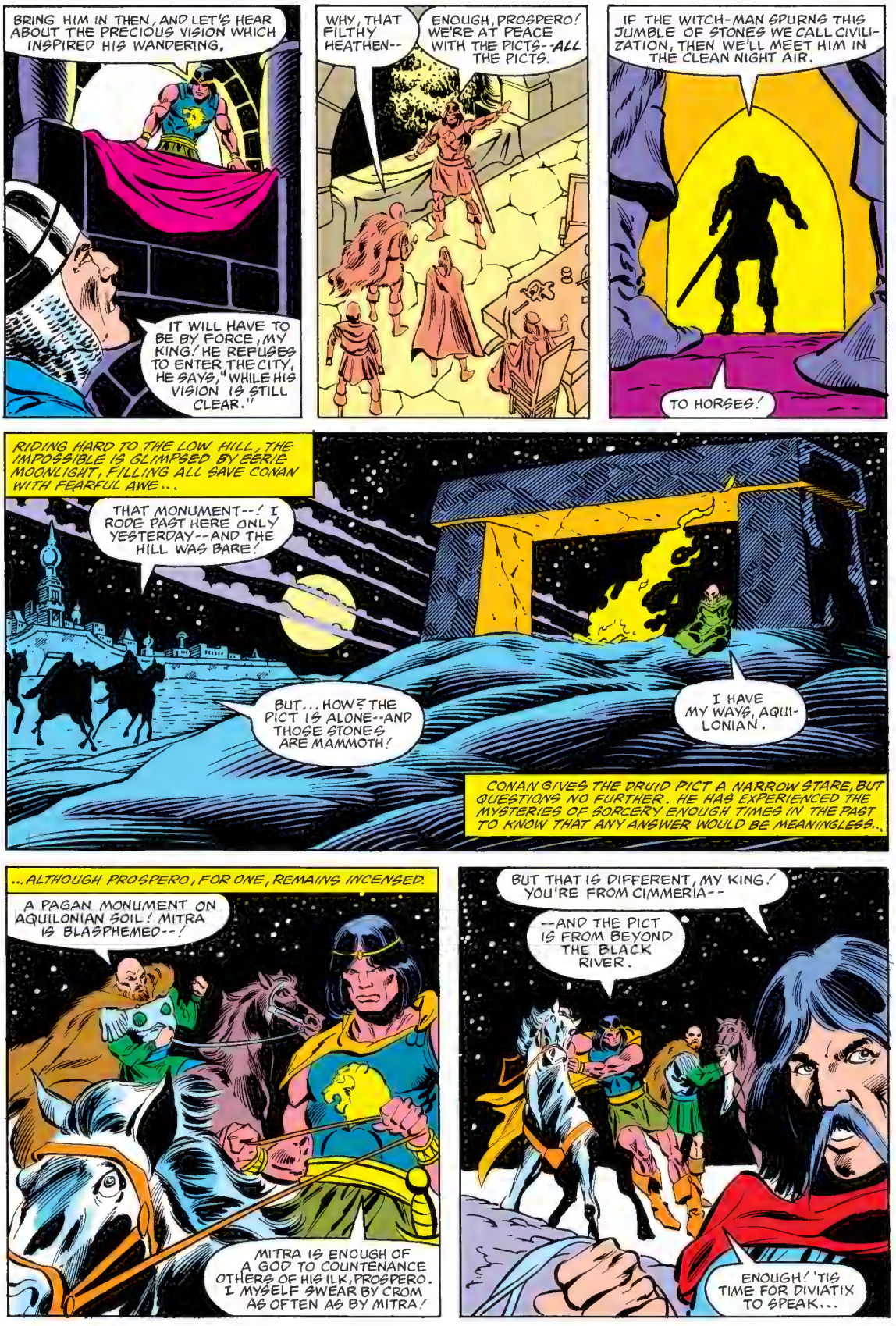

AYE, TROCERO, ALONE. WHETHER MY DESTINY IS TO STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH THE GODS OR ROT IN MOLOCH'S HELL WITH DEMONS AS MY ONLY COMPANIONS...
...I MEAN TO SEEK THAT DESTINY FACE TO FACE -- AND ALONE.


'TIS HARDLY A MATTER OF SEEKING YOUR DESTINY, CONAN... NOR IS IT A MATTER OF COURAGE OR COWARDICE! 'TIS A PRACTICAL MATTER... SURELY YOU SEE THAT? THE KINGDOM DEPENDS ON YOU...

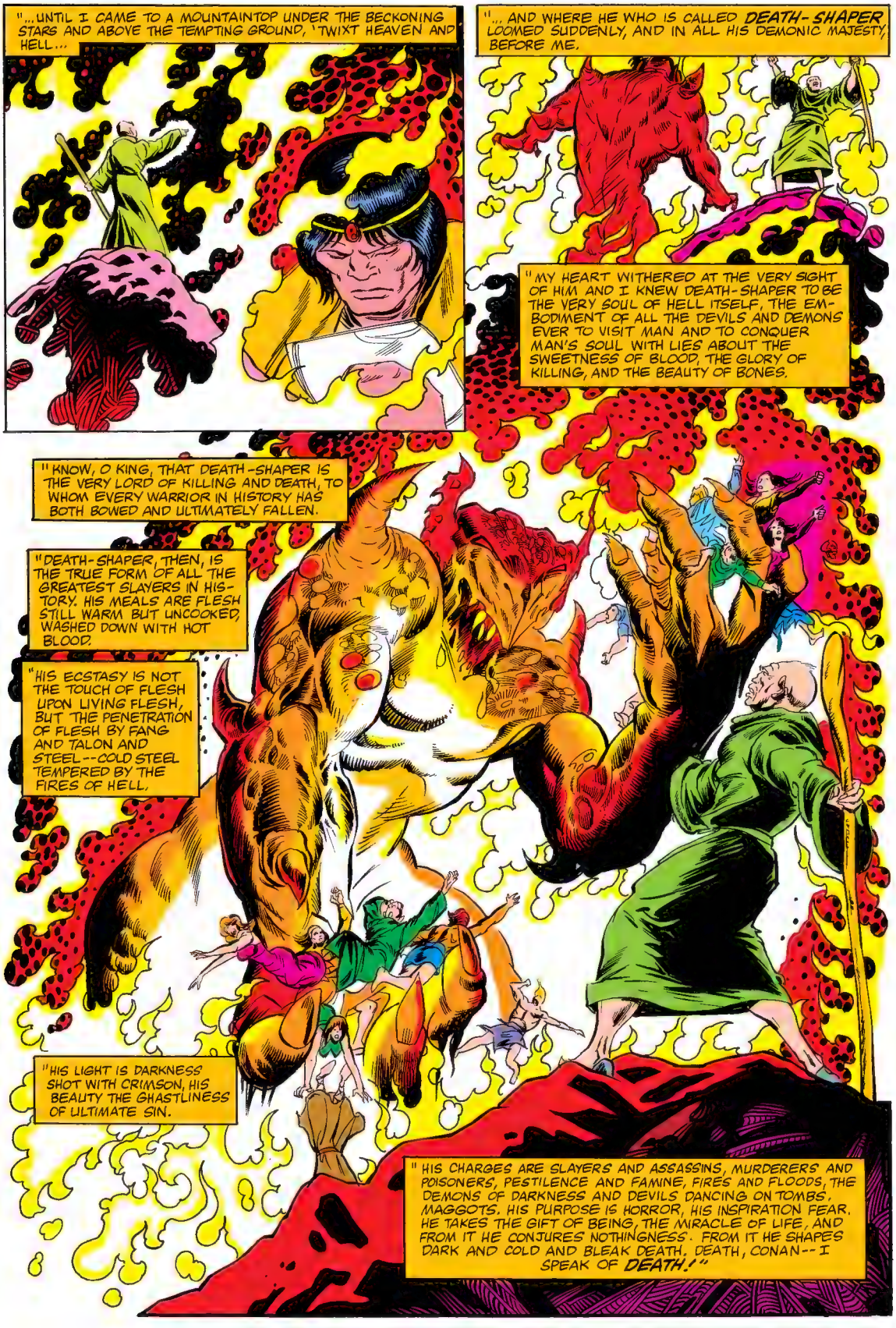
BUT I SPEAK IN PRACTICAL TERMS AS WELL. HOW DO YOU THINK I TOOK THE CROWN?
AGAINST ALL ODDS AND PRACTICAL ADVICE! NOT BY SKULKING OR HIDING, AS YOU WELL KNOW! AND I'LL NOT HIDE NOW!

ONLY BY RISKING ALL, PROSPERO, IS THE REWARD WORTH THE RISK.
AYE, MY KING, BUT--
HOLD! A RIDER COMES--BEARING HARD ON HIS MOUNT!

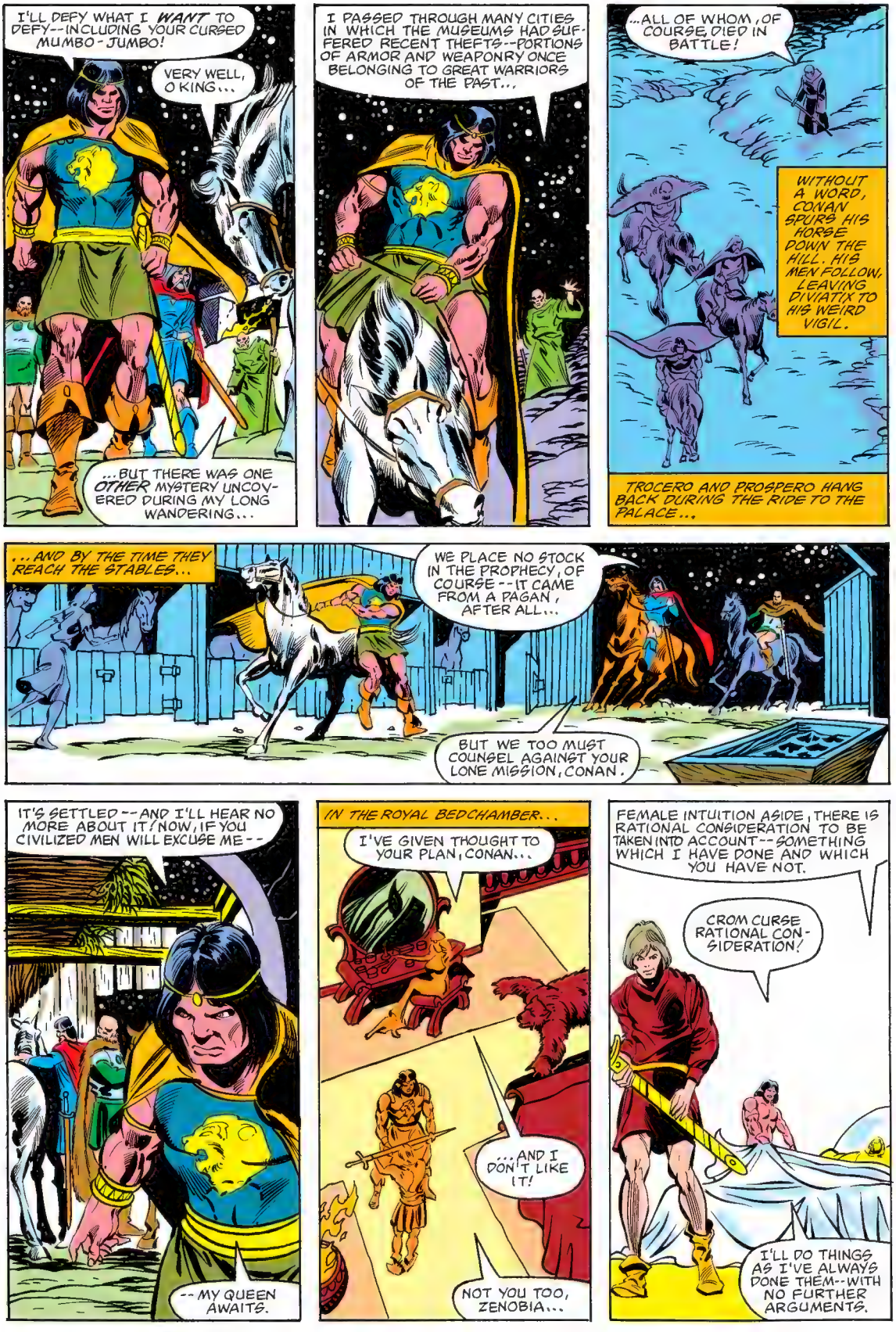
HO, RIDER! YOU BRING NEWS?
AYE, MY KING--THE DRUID PICT DIVIATIX HAS RETURNED!
HE CAMPS ON THE HILL BEYOND THE CITY'S GATES!


BRING HIM IN THEN, AND LET'S HEAR ABOUT THE PRECIOUS VISION WHICH INSPIRED HIS WANDERING.
IT WILL HAVE TO BE BY FORCE, MY KING! HE REFUSES TO ENTER THE CITY, HE SAYS, "WHILE HIS VISION IS STILL CLEAR."
WHY, THAT FILTHY HEATHEN--
ENOUGH, PROSPERO! WE'RE AT PEACE WITH THE PICTS--ALL THE PICTS.
IF THE WITCH-MAN SPURNS THIS JUMBLE OF STONES WE CALL CIVILIZATION, THEN WE'LL MEET HIM IN THE CLEAN NIGHT AIR.
TO HORSES!
RIDING HARD TO THE LOW HILL, THE IMPOSSIBLE IS GLIMPSED BY EERIE MOONLIGHT, FILLING ALL SAVE CONAN WITH FEARFUL AWE...
THAT MONUMENT--! I RODE PAST HERE ONLY YESTERDAY--AND THE HILL WAS BARE!
BUT...HOW? THE PICT IS ALONE--AND THOSE STONES ARE MAMMOTH!
I HAVE MY WAYS, AQUILONIAN.
CONAN GIVES THE DRUID PICT A NARROW STARE, BUT QUESTIONS NO FURTHER. HE HAS EXPERIENCED THE MYSTERIES OF SORCERY ENOUGH TIMES IN THE PAST TO KNOW THAT ANY ANSWER WOULD BE MEANINGLESS...
...ALTHOUGH PROSPERO, FOR ONE, REMAINS INCENSED.
A PAGAN MONUMENT ON AQUILONIAN SOIL! MITRA IS BLASPHEMED--!
MITRA IS ENOUGH OF A GOD TO COUNTENANCE OTHERS OF HIS ILK, PROSPERO. I MYSELF SWEAR BY CROM AS OFTEN AS BY MITRA!
BUT THAT IS DIFFERENT, MY KING! YOU'RE FROM CIMMERIA--
--AND THE PICT IS FROM BEYOND THE BLACK RIVER.
ENOUGH! 'TIS TIME FOR DIVIATIX TO SPEAK...

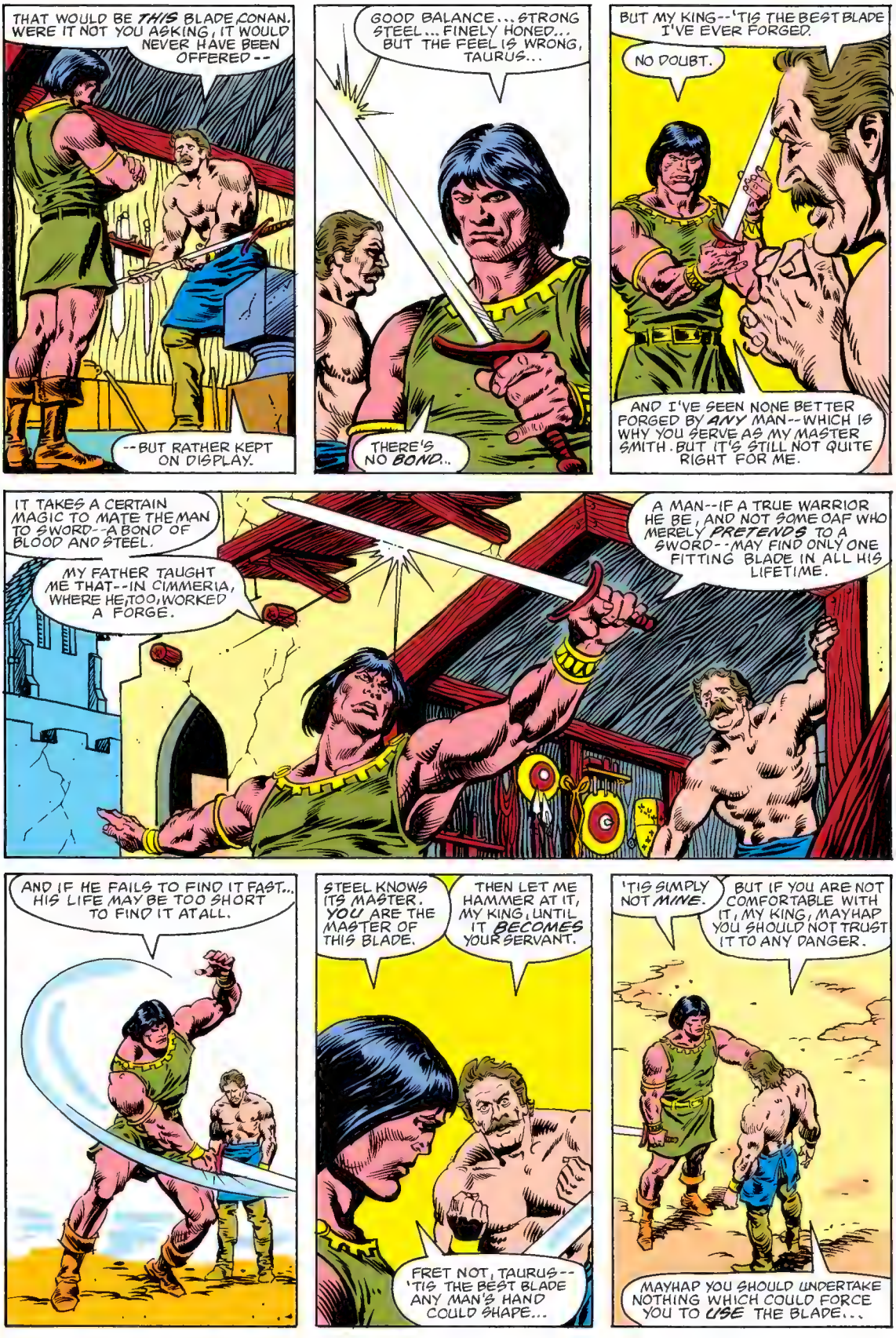
HIGH-PITCHED AND CRACKING, THE DRUID'S VOICE ISSUES IN SING-SONG CADENCE...
I HAVE BEEN ON A PILGRIMAGE, KING CONAN, SINCE THE TIME OF THE RED MOON.
AYE, AND THE SHAMAN GORANDA, WHO TOOK YOUR PLACE, CAUSED MUCH TROUBLE FOR MY SON, CONN.*
* SEE ISSUE #9 -- LOUISE.
THEN GORANDA IS NOW DEAD, NO DOUBT.
NO DOUBT.
I REGRET TO HEAR OF YOUR TROUBLES, KING CONAN...
...AND OF GORANDA'S SEDUCTION BY THE DARK LURE -- BUT THE DICTATES OF MY VISION COULD NOT BE DENIED.
WHAT WAS YOUR VISION, DIVIATIX?
AT FIRST A MERE WHISPERING IN MY INNER EAR...
...AND A STRANGE COLOR BARELY GLIMPSED BY MY INNER SIGHT...BUT LATER IT BECAME MORE, FAR MORE. SIT BEFORE THE FIRE, O KING AND I SHALL SHARE THAT VISION.
DIVIATIX INTONES WEIRD SOUNDS IN COUNTERPOINT TO THE CRACKLING FIRE -- PERHAPS THE WORDS OF AN UNKNOWN TONGUE -- AND AN OVERWHELMING SENSE OF RELAXATION WASHES OVER CONAN LIKE A WARM TIDE...
SOON HE SLIPS INTO A STATE OF FLOATING SUSPENSION FROM WHICH THE REAL WORLD HAS BEEN BARRED, AND IN WHICH THE ONLY REALITY BECOMES THE RISING AND FALLING OF DIVIATIX'S STRANGE VOICE...
...AND IN THE FLAMES-IMAGES CONJURED BY HIS WORDS.
"SINCE TIME OF THE RED MOON, O KING, I HAVE BEEN SPURRED BY MY INNER VISION, DRIVEN ON AND ON...
"THE WHERE AND WHEN OF MY DESTINATION, I KNEW NOT, AND SIMPLY FOLLOWED WHEREVER MY FEET AND SACRED STAFF CARRIED ME...

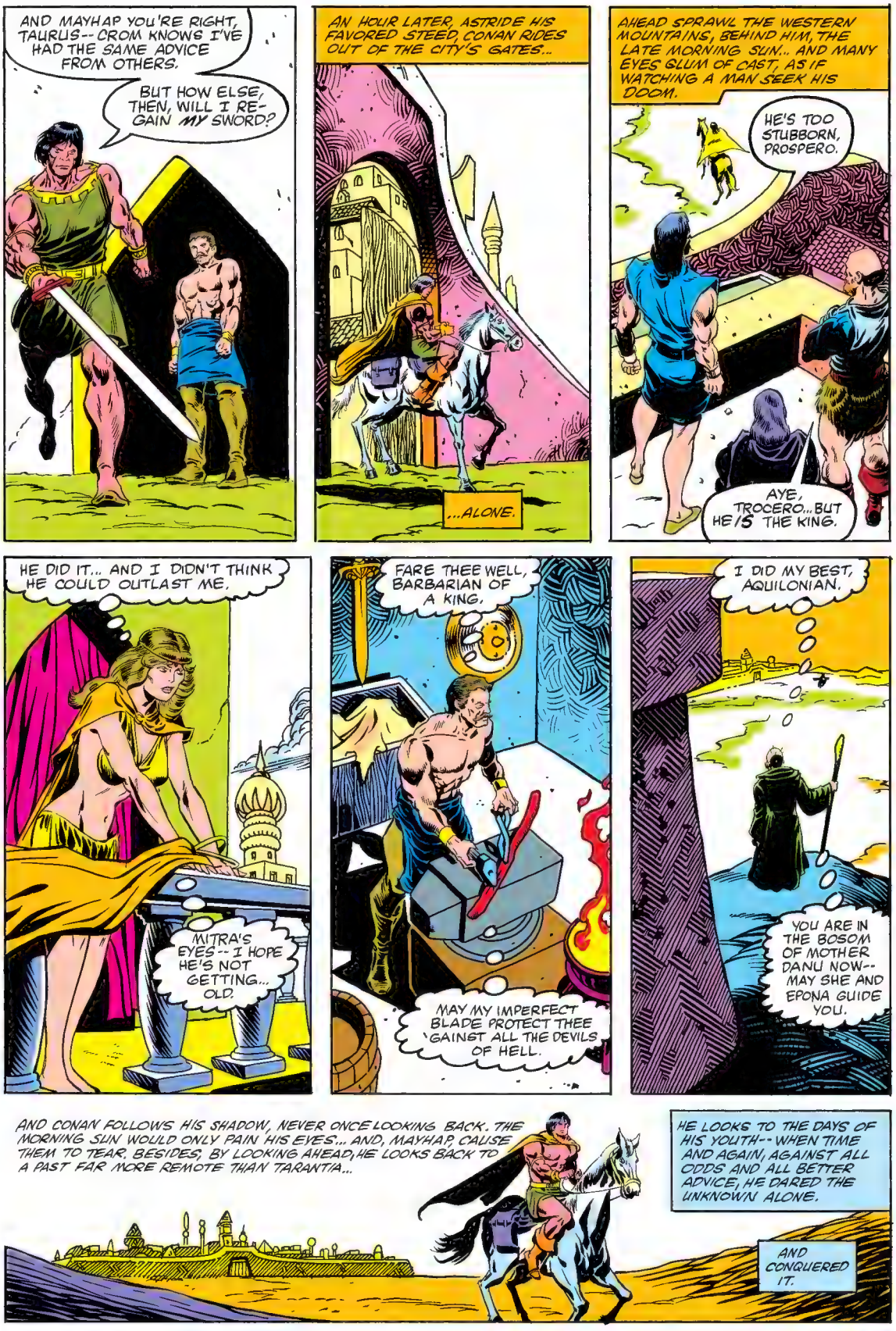

"...UNTIL I CAME TO A MOUNTAINTOP UNDER THE BECKONING STARS AND ABOVE THE TEMPTING GROUND, 'TWIXT HEAVEN AND HELL...
"...AND WHERE HE WHO IS CALLED DEATH-SHAPER LOOMED SUDDENLY, AND IN ALL HIS DEMONIC MAJESTY, BEFORE ME.
"MY HEART WITHERED AT THE VERY SIGHT OF HIM AND I KNEW DEATH-SHAPER TO BE THE VERY SOUL OF HELL ITSELF, THE EMBODIMENT OF ALL THE DEVILS AND DEMONS EVER TO VISIT MAN AND TO CONQUER MAN'S SOUL WITH LIES ABOUT THE SWEETNESS OF BLOOD, THE GLORY OF KILLING, AND THE BEAUTY OF BONES.
"I KNOW, O KING, THAT DEATH-SHAPER IS THE VERY LORD OF KILLING AND DEATH, TO WHOM EVERY WARRIOR IN HISTORY HAS BOTH BOWED AND ULTIMATELY FALLEN.
"DEATH-SHAPER, THEN, IS THE TRUE FORM OF ALL THE GREATEST SLAYERS IN HISTORY. HIS MEALS ARE FLESH STILL WARM BUT UNCOOKED, WASHED DOWN WITH HOT BLOOD.
"HIS ECSTASY IS NOT THE TOUCH OF FLESH UPON LIVING FLESH, BUT THE PENETRATION OF FLESH BY FANG AND TALON AND STEEL--COLD STEEL TEMPERED BY THE FIRES OF HELL.
"HIS LIGHT IS DARKNESS SHOT WITH CRIMSON, HIS BEAUTY THE GHASTLINESS OF ULTIMATE SIN.
"HIS CHARGES ARE SLAYERS AND ASSASSINS, MURDERERS AND POISONERS, PESTILENCE AND FAMINE, FIRES AND FLOODS, THE DEMONS OF DARKNESS AND DEVILS DANCING ON TOMBS, MAGGOTS. HIS PURPOSE IS HORROR, HIS INSPIRATION FEAR. HE TAKES THE GIFT OF BEING, THE MIRACLE OF LIFE, AND FROM IT HE CONJURES NOTHINGNESS. FROM IT HE SHAPES DARK AND COLD AND BLEAK DEATH. DEATH, CONAN--I SPEAK OF DEATH!"

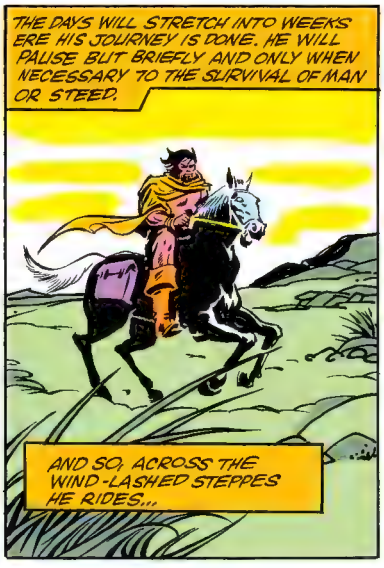
AND HE IS COMING, O KING! DEATH-SHAPER COMES FOR YOU!
BEWARE, O KING, WHEN YOU MEET HIM IN THE FLESH... FOR A MERE VISION OF HIS LOATHSOME MAJESTY NEARLY DROVE ME MAD!
ENOUGH, PICT! YOUR VISION IS CLEAR ENOUGH!
AND WITH SUPREME EFFORT, CONAN WRENCHES HIS EYES FROM THE FLAME.
THE WORLD SEEMS TO FALL AWAY, SPINNING INTO AN ABYSS FAR BELOW HIS FEET AS HE RISES-- BUT SHOWS NONE OF THE EFFECTS, STRIDING STEADILY AWAY...
AYE, CONAN-- TOO CLEAR...
...AND IT INSPIRED A PROPHECY WHICH I SHALL NOW MAKE...
A GREAT ONE SHALL SUCCUMB TO DEATH-SHAPER'S WAYS. THERE SHALL BE A RETURN TO THE PAST, AND A BETRAYAL OF LOVE. MASKS SHALL BE LIFTED, AND FACES FOUND STRANGE...
...AND IT SHALL END WITH THE GREATEST DEATH OF ALL-- THE DEATH OF HE WHO COULD RULE THE WORLD!
HEATHEN FILTH! HE MEANS YOUR DEATH, CONAN. HOW DARE HE--
HOLD, TROCERO...
A PROPHECY CAN UNDO ONLY THE MAN WHO PLACES STOCK IN IT. I PLACE NONE IN THE PICT'S MUMBLING.
AND YET, O KING, SOON YOU WOULD EMBARK ON A JOURNEY FRAUGHT WITH DIRE PERIL-- THE PERFECT SETTING FOR AN ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH-SHAPER.
HOW DO YOU KNOW MY PLANS?!
I KNOW. BUT CURSE ME NOT, O KING.
I HAVE COME AS A FRIEND... TO GIVE YOU FAIR WARNING OF KNOWLEDGE YOU COULD NEVER GAIN OTHERWISE. MY ADVICE-- REMAIN IN TARANTIA, SAFE WITHIN YOUR CITY'S WALLS. DEFY NOT MY PROPHECY!


I'LL DEFY WHAT I WANT TO DEFY--INCLUDING YOUR CURSED MUMBO-JUMBO!
VERY WELL, O KING...
...BUT THERE WAS ONE OTHER MYSTERY UNCOVERED DURING MY LONG WANDERING...
I PASSED THROUGH MANY CITIES IN WHICH THE MUSEUMS HAD SUFFERED RECENT THEFTS--PORTIONS OF ARMOR AND WEAPONRY ONCE BELONGING TO GREAT WARRIORS OF THE PAST...
...ALL OF WHOM, OF COURSE, DIED IN BATTLE!
WITHOUT A WORD, CONAN SPURS HIS HORSE DOWN THE HILL. HIS MEN FOLLOW, LEAVING DIVIATIX TO HIS WEIRD VIGIL.
TROCERO AND PROSPERO HANG BACK DURING THE RIDE TO THE PALACE...
...AND BY THE TIME THEY REACH THE STABLES...
WE PLACE NO STOCK IN THE PROPHECY, OF COURSE--IT CAME FROM A PAGAN, AFTER ALL...
BUT WE TOO MUST COUNSEL AGAINST YOUR LONE MISSION, CONAN.
IT'S SETTLED--AND I'LL HEAR NO MORE ABOUT IT! NOW, IF YOU CIVILIZED MEN WILL EXCUSE ME--
--MY QUEEN AWAITS.
IN THE ROYAL BEDCHAMBER...
I'VE GIVEN THOUGHT TO YOUR PLAN, CONAN...
...AND I DON'T LIKE IT!
NOT YOU TOO, ZENOBIA...
FEMALE INTUITION ASIDE, THERE IS RATIONAL CONSIDERATION TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT--SOMETHING WHICH I HAVE DONE AND WHICH YOU HAVE NOT.
CROM CURSE RATIONAL CONSIDERATION!
I'LL DO THINGS AS I'VE ALWAYS DONE THEM--WITH NO FURTHER ARGUMENTS.

NOW COME HERE WOMAN, AND--
VERY WELL, MY HUSBAND--HAVE IT YOUR WAY. NO FURTHER ARGUMENT.
GOOD NIGHT.
THAT'S WHAT I LIKE ABOUT YOU, ZENOBIA--YOU FIND WAYS OF WINNING WITHOUT WINNING. BUT IT WON'T WORK THIS TIME...
I'VE MADE UP MY MIND--AND I CAN HOLD OUT LONGER THAN YOU.
BUT BY MORNING, CONAN IS IN A FOUL MOOD...
WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE MY SWORD IS--?
WHERE'S THE SERVANT WHO TOOK IT LAST NIGHT?
I... I AM SORRY, O KING. HE...HE IS... MISSING.
MISSING--? THEN THE SWORD WAS STOLEN--WHICH PLACES ME IN HIGH COMPANY, INDEED--IN THE RANKS OF HISTORY'S GREATEST WARRIORS... BUT BY CROM, I'M NOT READY FOR A MUSEUM YET...
WHAT WAS THE SERVANT'S NAME? WHERE WAS HE FROM--?
HE...HE WAS NAMED FALEN, O KING--
--FROM NEMEDIA... A CITY CALLED THALIA.
THALIA--WHERE THE CULT OF PENTAGAR ZEX IS SAID TO SKULK! THEN ALL THE THREADS BEGIN TO WEAVE TOGETHER--AND THEY WOULD BIND ME FROM FOLLOWING THE PRIME THREAD TO ITS END...
SMALL CHANCE!
Y-YES, O KING... WHATEVER YOU S-SAY.
SOON IN A BUSTLING QUARTER OF THE CITY...
A GOOD MORN TO YE, MY KING! MAY I BE OF SERVICE?
THE K-KING!
AYE, TAURUS--I WANT THE BEST BLADE YOU'VE GOT.


THAT WOULD BE THIS BLADE, CONAN, WERE IT NOT YOU ASKING, IT WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN OFFERED--
--BUT RATHER KEPT ON DISPLAY.
GOOD BALANCE... STRONG STEEL... FINELY HONED... BUT THE FEEL IS WRONG, TAURUS...
THERE'S NO BOND...
BUT MY KING--'TIS THE BEST BLADE I'VE EVER FORGED.
NO DOUBT.
AND I'VE SEEN NONE BETTER FORGED BY ANY MAN--WHICH IS WHY YOU SERVE AS MY MASTER SMITH. BUT IT'S STILL NOT QUITE RIGHT FOR ME.
IT TAKES A CERTAIN MAGIC TO MATE THE MAN TO SWORD--A BOND OF BLOOD AND STEEL.
MY FATHER TAUGHT ME THAT--IN CIMMERIA, WHERE HE, TOO, WORKED A FORGE.
A MAN--IF A TRUE WARRIOR HE BE, AND NOT SOME OAF WHO MERELY PRETENDS TO A SWORD--MAY FIND ONLY ONE FITTING BLADE IN ALL HIS LIFETIME.
AND IF HE FAILS TO FIND IT FAST... HIS LIFE MAY BE TOO SHORT TO FIND IT AT ALL.
STEEL KNOWS ITS MASTER. YOU ARE THE MASTER OF THIS BLADE.
THEN LET ME HAMMER AT IT, MY KING, UNTIL IT BECOMES YOUR SERVANT.
FRET NOT, TAURUS--'TIS THE BEST BLADE ANY MAN'S HAND COULD SHAPE...
'TIS SIMPLY NOT MINE.
BUT IF YOU ARE NOT COMFORTABLE WITH IT, MY KING, MAYHAP YOU SHOULD NOT TRUST IT TO ANY DANGER.
MAYHAP YOU SHOULD UNDERTAKE NOTHING WHICH COULD FORCE YOU TO USE THE BLADE...

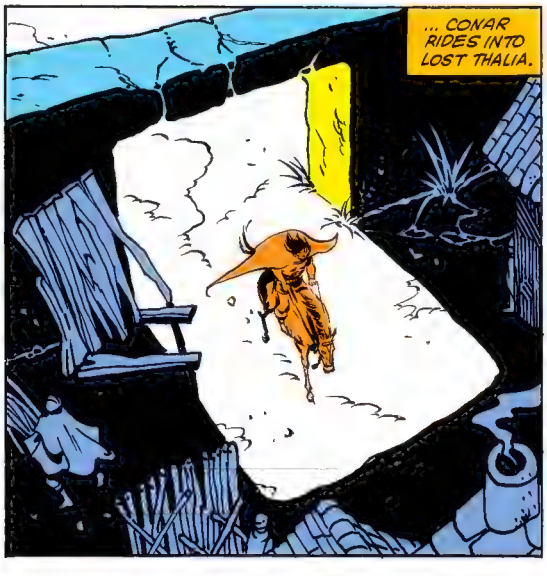

AND MAYHAP YOU'RE RIGHT, TAURUS-- CROM KNOWS I'VE HAD THE SAME ADVICE FROM OTHERS.
BUT HOW ELSE, THEN, WILL I REGAIN MY SWORD?
AN HOUR LATER, ASTRIDE HIS FAVORED STEED, CONAN RIDES OUT OF THE CITY'S GATES...
...ALONE.
AHEAD SPRAWL THE WESTERN MOUNTAINS, BEHIND HIM, THE LATE MORNING SUN... AND MANY EYES GLUM OF CAST, AS IF WATCHING A MAN SEEK HIS DOOM.
HE'S TOO STUBBORN, PROSPERO.
AYE, TROCERO... BUT HE IS THE KING.
HE DID IT... AND I DIDN'T THINK HE COULD OUTLAST ME.
MITRA'S EYES -- I HOPE HE'S NOT GETTING... OLD.
FARE THEE WELL, BARBARIAN OF A KING.
MAY MY IMPERFECT BLADE PROTECT THEE 'GAINST ALL THE DEVILS OF HELL.
I DID MY BEST, AQUILONIAN.
YOU ARE IN THE BOSOM OF MOTHER DANU NOW-- MAY SHE AND EPONA GUIDE YOU.
AND CONAN FOLLOWS HIS SHADOW, NEVER ONCE LOOKING BACK. THE MORNING SUN WOULD ONLY PAIN HIS EYES... AND, MAYHAP, CAUSE THEM TO TEAR. BESIDES, BY LOOKING AHEAD, HE LOOKS BACK TO A PAST FAR MORE REMOTE THAN TARANTIA...
HE LOOKS TO THE DAYS OF HIS YOUTH-- WHEN TIME AND AGAIN, AGAINST ALL ODDS AND ALL BETTER ADVICE, HE DARED THE UNKNOWN ALONE.
AND CONQUERED IT.

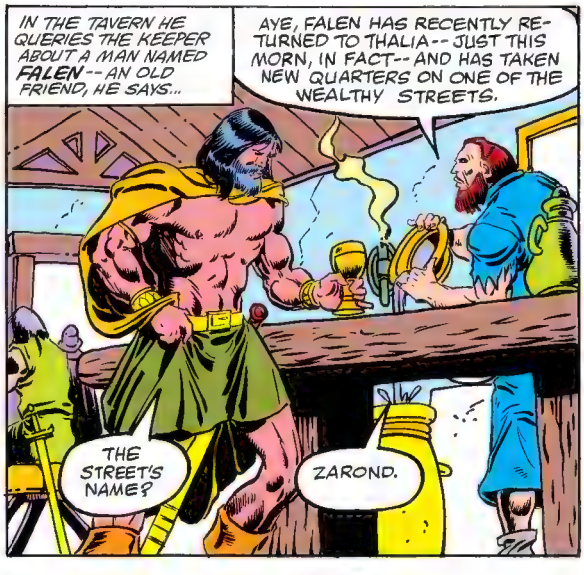

THE DAYS WILL STRETCH INTO WEEKS ERE HIS JOURNEY IS DONE. HE WILL PAUSE BUT BRIEFLY AND ONLY WHEN NECESSARY TO THE SURVIVAL OF MAN OR STEED.
AND SO, ACROSS THE WIND-LASHED STEPPES HE RIDES...

...UP THE WESTERN PEAKS THROUGH DRIVING SNOW...
MAJESTIC THEY ARE, HE THINKS, BUT MERE HILLS COMPARED TO THE MOUNTAINS OF HIS HOMELAND IN CIMMERIA.

AND FINALLY, DOWN THE EASTERN SLOPES, AGAIN INTO A WARMER CLIME...
...AND INTO NEMEDIA.

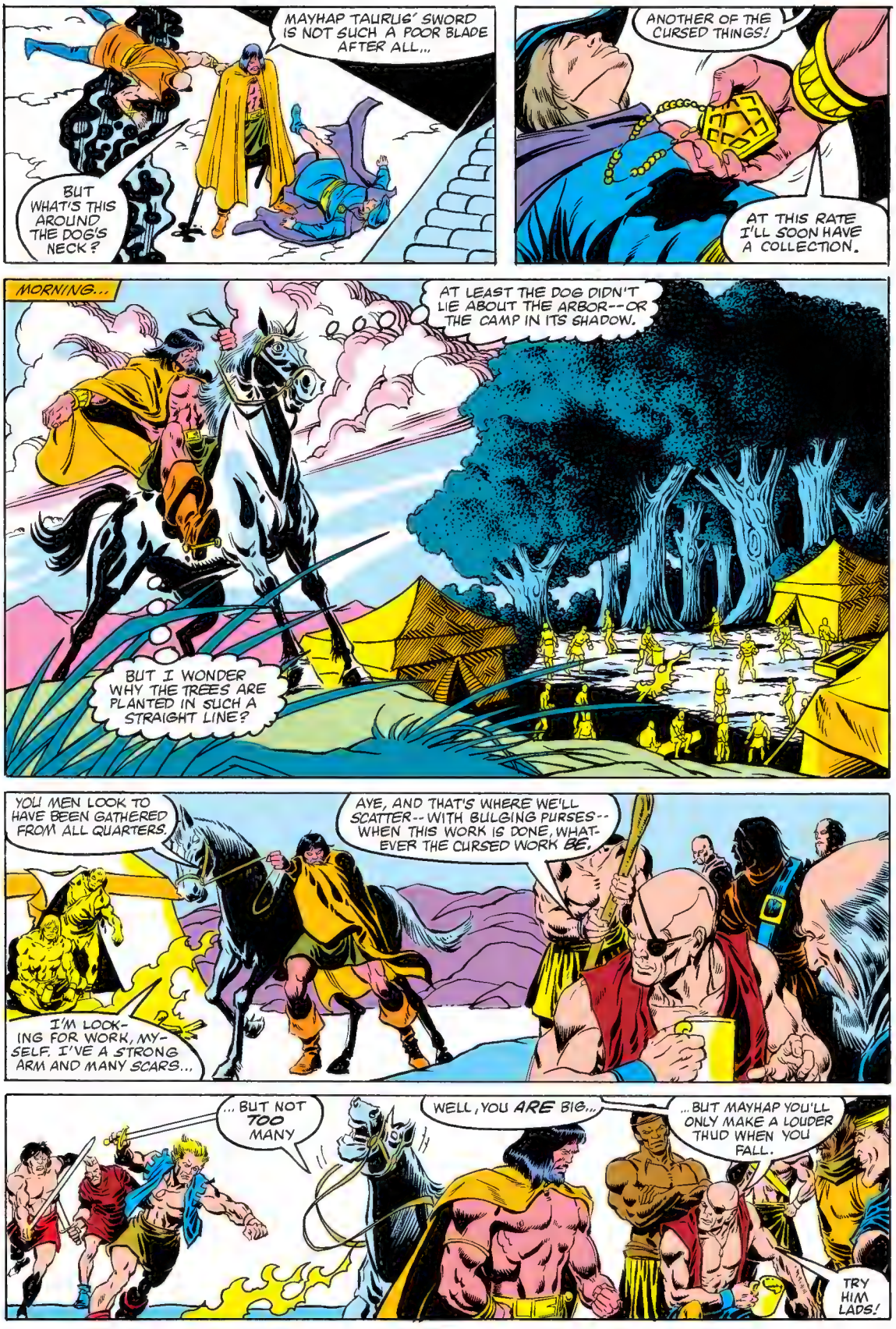
BY THEN, LOOKING DOWN UPON THE SMALL CITY OF THALIA, ANCIENT AND NEARLY FORGOTTEN IN THE MISTS OF ANTIQUITY...
THE PASSAGE HAS BEEN JUST LONG ENOUGH-- MY BEARD IS FULLY GROWN.
SATISFIED THAT HE ENJOYS THE ANONYMITY OF HIS YOUTHFUL YEARS, FROM A LONG TIME BEFORE HE BECAME KING--AYE, FROM A TIME WHEN HE ROVED THE WORLD AS A THIEF AND REAVER, PIRATE AND MERCENARY...


... CONAR RIDES INTO LOST THALIA.


IN THE TAVERN HE QUERIES THE KEEPER ABOUT A MAN NAMED FALEN--AN OLD FRIEND, HE SAYS...
AYE, FALEN HAS RECENTLY RETURNED TO THALIA--JUST THIS MORN, IN FACT--AND HAS TAKEN NEW QUARTERS ON ONE OF THE WEALTHY STREETS.
THE STREET'S NAME?
ZAROND.

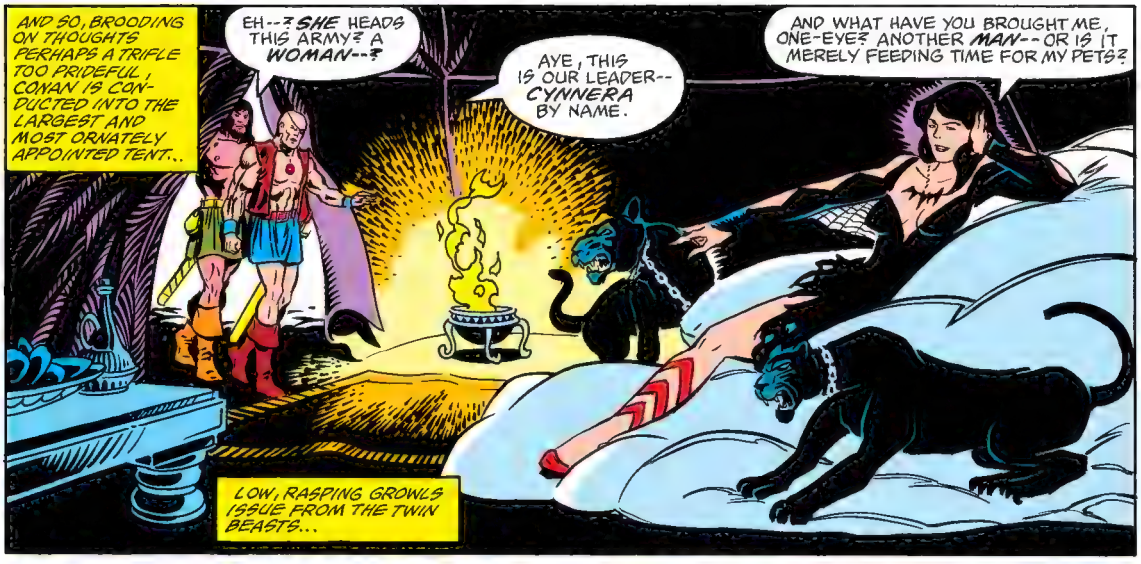
AND BY NIGHTFALL, CONAN IS CLOAKED IN SHADOWS, ACROSS FROM A NEW HOUSE NOW HOSTING A NEW TENANT...
AH! HERE'S THE FILTHY BEGGAR--THOUGH HARDLY A BEGGAR NOW!
IN FACT, IT SEEMS MY FORMER SERVANT NOW BOASTS SERVANTS OF HIS OWN--BODYGUARDS.
MEANING... HE IS TRULY RICH INDEED...
...WITH RICHES AND WEALTH BOUGHT BY A STOLEN SWORD!
HOLD, FALEN! LEST I SULLY YOUR FINE NEW GARMENTS WITH BLOOD!
A THIEF! PROTECT ME! IT'S WHAT I'M PAYING YOU FOR! SLAY HIM!
THE BODYGUARDS, IN THEIR DEFENSE, DO THEIR BEST TO OBEY.
BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH.

NOW FALEN-- WHERE'S THE SWORD?
WH-WHAT SWORD--? I... I KNOW NOT WHAT YOU--
DON'T LIE TO ME, DOG-- UNLESS YOU WANT YOUR TONGUE TO BURN IN MOLOCH'S FLAMES! YOU GAVE THE SWORD TO THE WRONG ONES!
YOU WERE DECEIVED! IT WAS TO COME TO ME-- THENCE TO BE CONVEYED TO OUR MASTER!
YOU MEAN I... I MADE A MISTAKE?!
BUT THE GOLD THEY GAVE ME--
--WAS THE AGREED SUM, LEARNED BY THEIR SPIES! WITHOUT SUCH KNOWLEDGE, HOW ELSE COULD THEY HOPE TO DECEIVE YOU?!
NO! I DID NOT MEAN TO MAKE SUCH A MISTAKE! I AM LOYAL, I SWEAR TO YOU!
IT WAS AN HONEST MISTAKE! I EMBARKED ON NO TREACHERY OR--
I KNOW THAT! TELL ME WHERE YOU TOOK THE SWORD AND I MAY SHOW YOU MERCY!
I... I TOOK IT TO THE MERCENARY CAMP BY THE ARBOR-- THE GIANT TREES --IN THE HILLS TO THE EAST...
...NO MORE THAN AN HOUR'S RIDE!
THEY CLAIMED TO REPRESENT OUR LEADER! I--
THEN, IN A GLINT OF MOONLIGHT, FALEN CATCHES SIGHT OF UNMISTAKABLE STEEL-BLUE EYES ABOVE THE MASKING BEARD...
CONAN! THE KING!
AND HE KNOWS A LAST MOMENT OF HORROR...
AYE, DOG-- THE KING WHO BROOKS TREACHERY WITH SHORT PATIENCE!
...BEFORE ENTERING THE DARKNESS OF ETERNITY.


MAYHAP TAURUS' SWORD IS NOT SUCH A POOR BLADE AFTER ALL...
BUT WHAT'S THIS AROUND THE DOG'S NECK?
ANOTHER OF THE CURSED THINGS!
AT THIS RATE I'LL SOON HAVE A COLLECTION.
MORNING...
AT LEAST THE DOG DIDN'T LIE ABOUT THE ARBOR--OR THE CAMP IN ITS SHADOW.
BUT I WONDER WHY THE TREES ARE PLANTED IN SUCH A STRAIGHT LINE?
YOU MEN LOOK TO HAVE BEEN GATHERED FROM ALL QUARTERS.
AYE, AND THAT'S WHERE WE'LL SCATTER--WITH BULGING PURSES--WHEN THIS WORK IS DONE, WHATEVER THE CURSED WORK BE.
I'M LOOKING FOR WORK, MYSELF. I'VE A STRONG ARM AND MANY SCARS...
... BUT NOT TOO MANY
WELL, YOU ARE BIG...
...BUT MAYHAP YOU'LL ONLY MAKE A LOUDER THUD WHEN YOU FALL.
TRY HIM LADS!

CONAN DUCKS, WHIRLING UNDER THE REAR ATTACK...
UHN!
YOU MEN DON'T WASTE TIME, DO YOU?--
OOOAH!
--ONCE YOU'VE DECIDED TO TEST A NEW PROSPECT!
YAHH!
I THINK I'M GOING TO LIKE YOUR COMPANY!
NOT SO FAST, OUTLANDER... ALTHOUGH I ADMIT YOU'VE EARNED A TRUE TEST.
BIND HIS RIGHT ARM.
YOU SPOKE TRULY, STRANGER, WHEN YOU CLAIMED TO HAVE A STRONG ARM -- BUT ALL LIVING MEN IN THIS WORLD HAVE ONE STRONG ARM -- ELSE THEY'D BE DEAD IN THE WORLD BEYOND!
BUT TO JOIN OUR RAGGED ARMY YOU NEED TWO STRONG ARMS.
WELL SAID, CYPIOS! GIVE HIM HIS BLADE -- AND SEE HOW HE FARES WITH HIS LEFT ARM!
FIVE THIS TIME, IS IT?

VERY WELL!
AGH-H!
YOU'LL FORGIVE ME IF IT TAKES A MITE LONGER...
...BUT IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I LAST ENCOUNTERED SUCH RARE SPORT!
AND SINCE I FIND MYSELF ENJOYING IT...
...WHY NOT PROLONG THE PLEASURE, eh?
LOOK OUT! HE'S CUT THE TENT-POLE!
NOW--DO YOU WANT THEM GUTTED, BEHEADED, OR SIMPLY TRUSSED UP AS THEY ARE?
WELL... WELL, WELL, WELL, FORGIVE OUR SPORT, FRIEND. IF I'D KNOWN YOUR METTLE--
AYE--AND IF I'VE PASSED THE TEST, SHOULDN'T YOU INTRODUCE ME TO YOUR LEADER?
OF COURSE--THIS WAY.
AGAIN YOU'VE SERVED ME WELL, BLADE. MAYHAP IT'S NOT SWORD...
...BUT THE MAN WHO WIELDS IT.

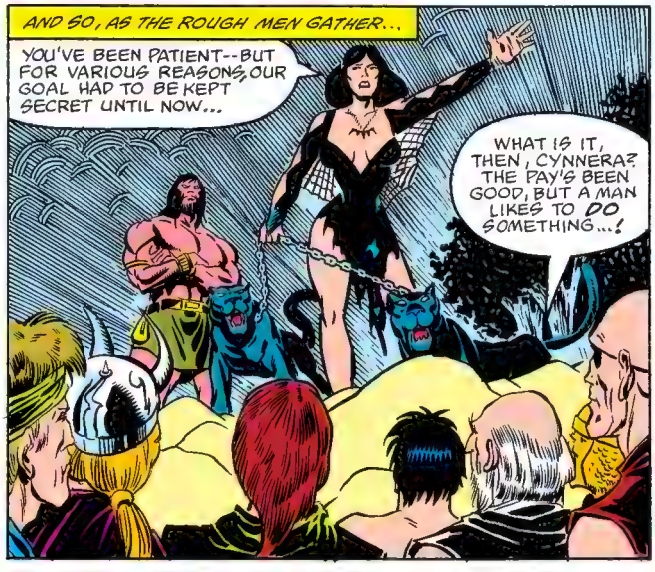

AND SO, BROODING ON THOUGHTS PERHAPS A TRIFLE TOO PRIDEFUL, CONAN IS CONDUCTED INTO THE LARGEST AND MOST ORNATELY APPOINTED TENT..
EH--? SHE HEADS THIS ARMY? A WOMAN--?
AYE, THIS IS OUR LEADER-- CYNNERA BY NAME.
AND WHAT HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME, ONE-EYE? ANOTHER MAN-- OR IS IT MERELY FEEDING TIME FOR MY PETS?
LOW, RASPING GROWLS ISSUE FROM THE TWIN BEASTS...

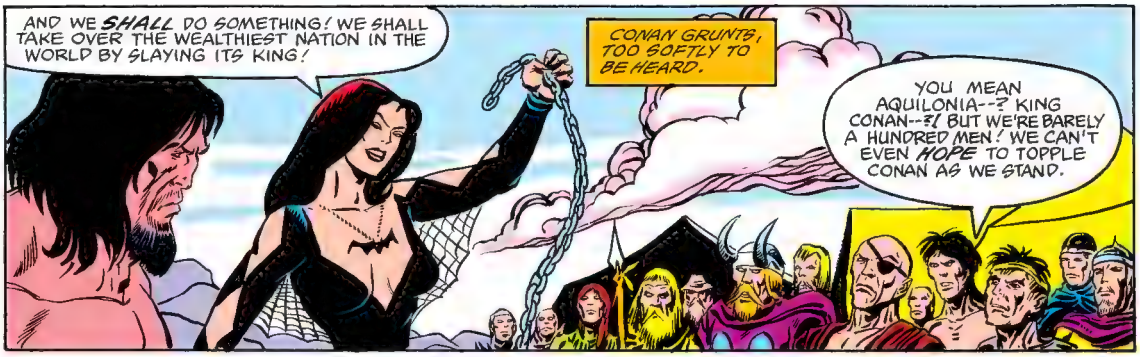
AND LISTENING TO THE ONE-EYED MAN'S WHISPERS, CYNNERA GAZES AT CONAN WITH FIRST NARROWED, THEN WIDENED EYES...
MMM... I SEE.

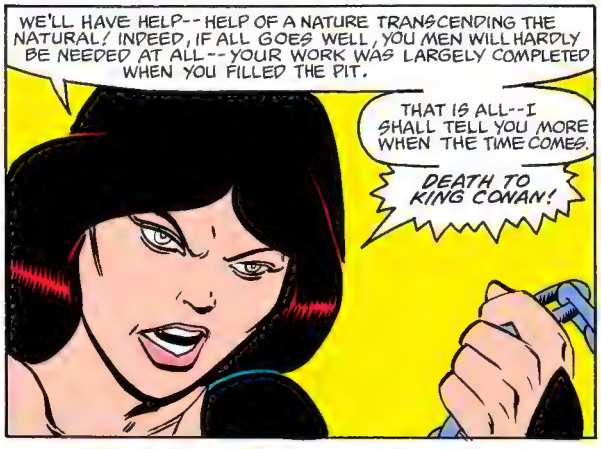
IN VIEW OF YOUR LEFT-HANDED PROWESS, MAN, IT SEEMS YOU HAVE A JOB, INDEED, WITH MUSCLES AS BROAD AS YOURS...
...YOU DESERVE TO BE MY PERSONAL BODYGUARD.

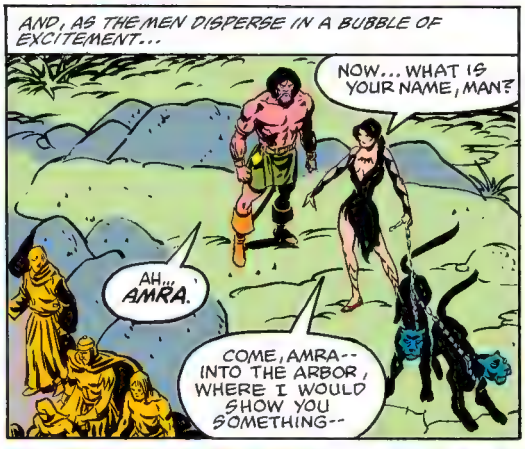
ALONG WITH YOUR OTHER TWO PETS?
YOU SHALL ENJOY SPECIAL PRIVILEGES, I ASSURE YOU. DO YOU ACCEPT THE JOB?
I'D BE A FOOL TO REFUSE, WOULDN'T I?

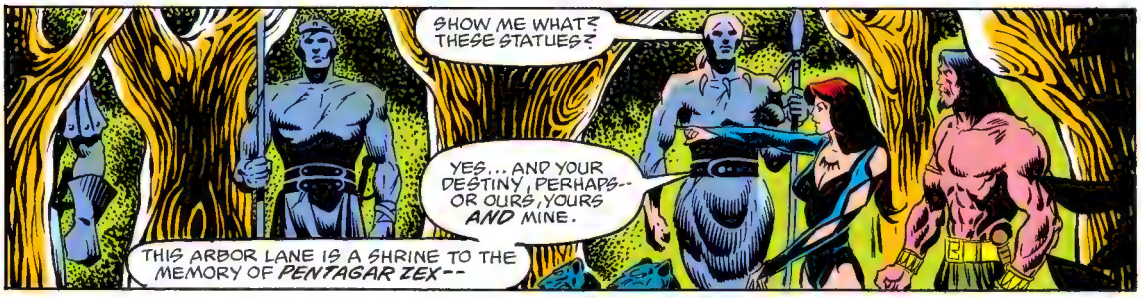
GOOD-- THEN YOUR FIRST DUTY WILL BE TO PROTECT ME FROM MY OWN MEN.
THEIR FEAR OF MY CATS IS BEGINNING TO WANE, I THINK, AND IT'S PAST TIME TO ADDRESS THEM ON THE NATURE OF OUR ENTERPRISE...

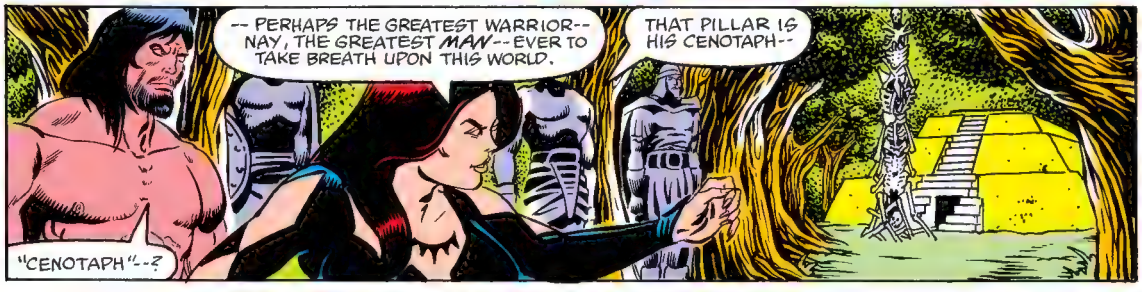

AND SO, AS THE ROUGH MEN GATHER...
YOU'VE BEEN PATIENT--BUT FOR VARIOUS REASONS, OUR GOAL HAD TO BE KEPT SECRET UNTIL NOW...
WHAT IS IT, THEN, CYNNERA? THE PAY'S BEEN GOOD, BUT A MAN LIKES TO DO SOMETHING...!

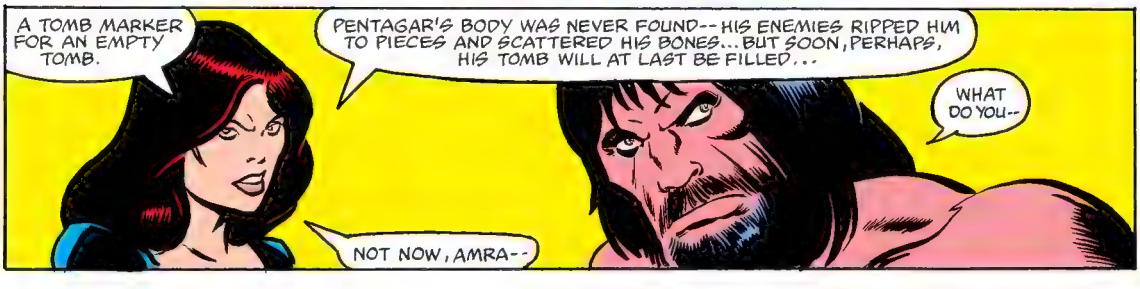

AND WE SHALL DO SOMETHING! WE SHALL TAKE OVER THE WEALTHIEST NATION IN THE WORLD BY SLAYING ITS KING!
CONAN GRUNTS, TOO SOFTLY TO BE HEARD.
YOU MEAN AQUILONIA--? KING CONAN--?! BUT WE'RE BARELY A HUNDRED MEN! WE CAN'T EVEN HOPE TO TOPPLE CONAN AS WE STAND.

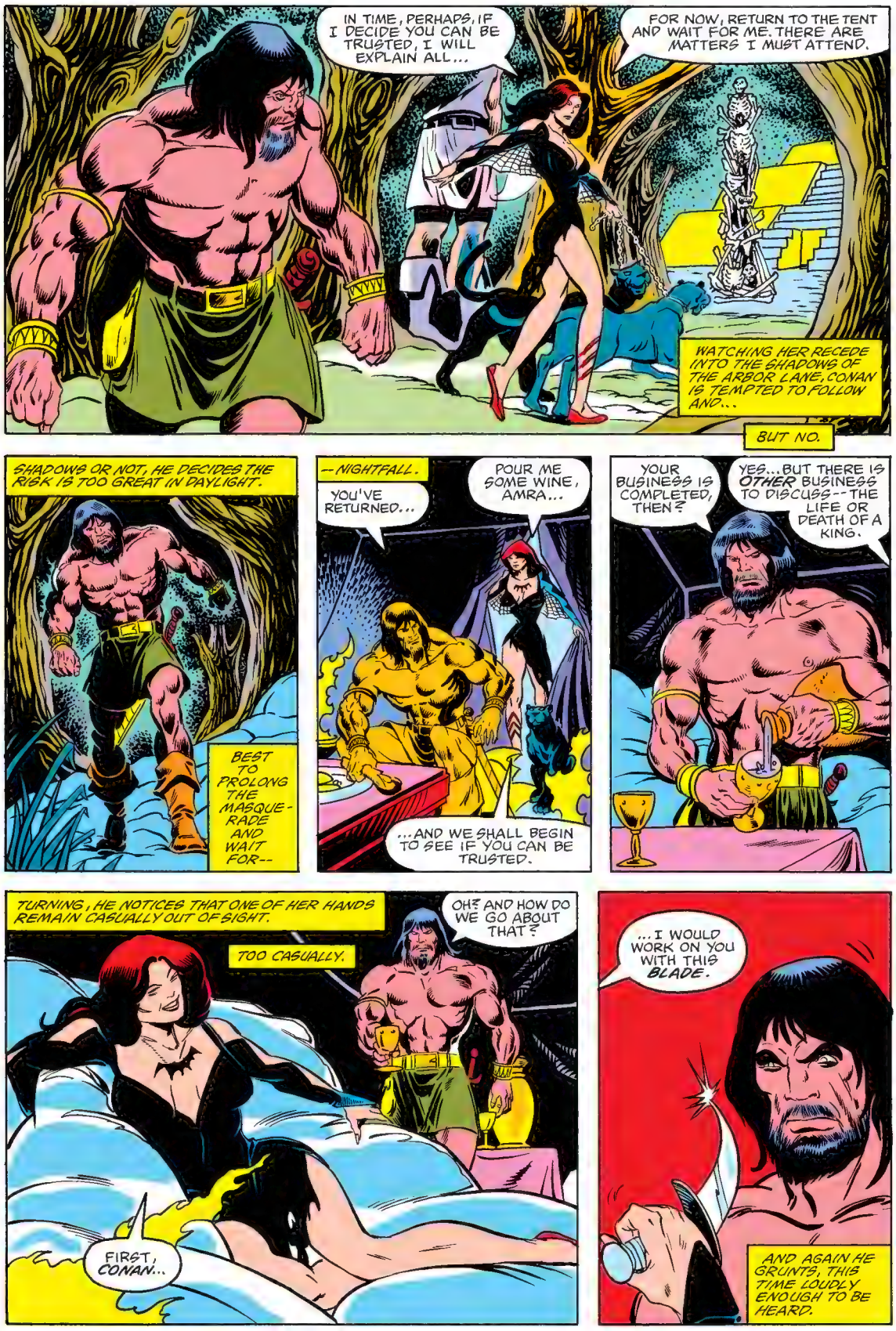

WE'LL HAVE HELP--HELP OF A NATURE TRANSCENDING THE NATURAL! INDEED, IF ALL GOES WELL, YOU MEN WILL HARDLY BE NEEDED AT ALL--YOUR WORK WAS LARGELY COMPLETED WHEN YOU FILLED THE PIT.
THAT IS ALL--I SHALL TELL YOU MORE WHEN THE TIME COMES.
DEATH TO KING CONAN!

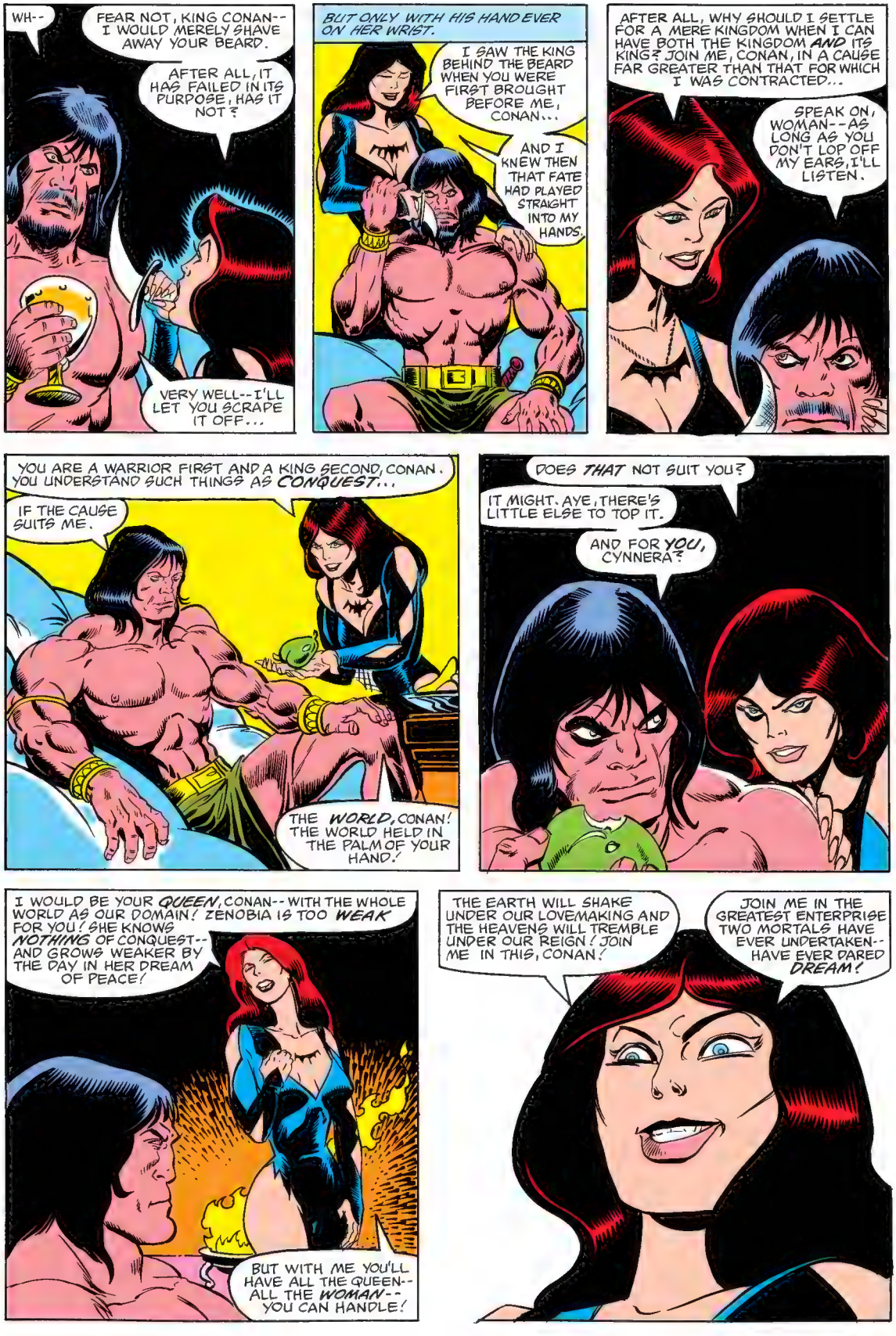

AND, AS THE MEN DISPERSE IN A BUBBLE OF EXCITEMENT...
NOW... WHAT IS YOUR NAME, MAN?
AH... AMRA.
COME, AMRA--INTO THE ARBOR, WHERE I WOULD SHOW YOU SOMETHING--

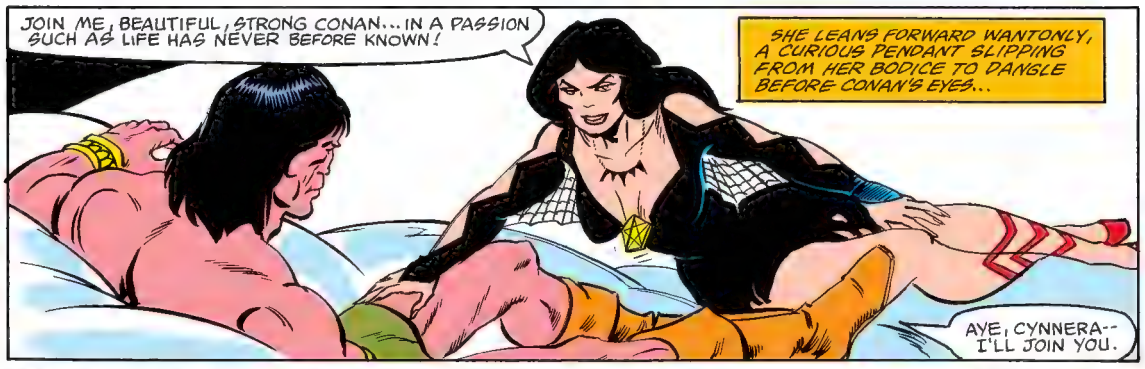

SHOW ME WHAT THESE STATUES?
YES... AND YOUR DESTINY, PERHAPS--OR OURS, YOURS AND MINE.
THIS ARBOR LANE IS A SHRINE TO THE MEMORY OF PENTAGAR ZEX--

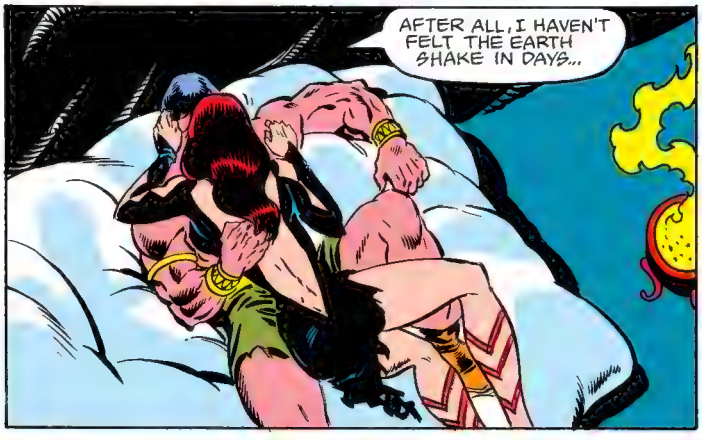

-- PERHAPS THE GREATEST WARRIOR--NAY, THE GREATEST MAN--EVER TO TAKE BREATH UPON THIS WORLD.
THAT PILLAR IS HIS CENOTAPH--
"CENOTAPH"--?


A TOMB MARKER FOR AN EMPTY TOMB.
PENTAGAR'S BODY WAS NEVER FOUND--HIS ENEMIES RIPPED HIM TO PIECES AND SCATTERED HIS BONES... BUT SOON, PERHAPS, HIS TOMB WILL AT LAST BE FILLED...
WHAT DO YOU--
NOT NOW, AMRA--

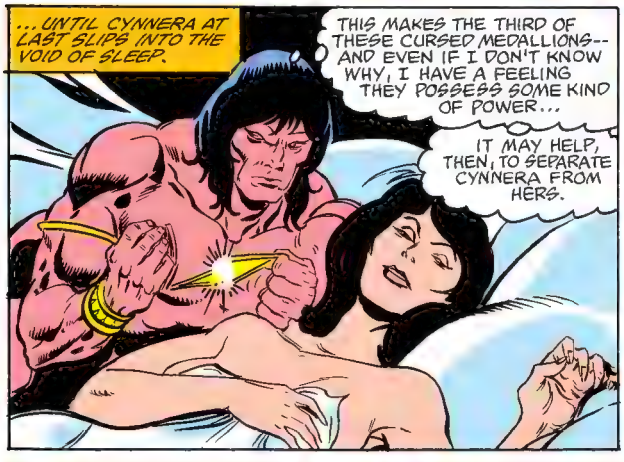

IN TIME, PERHAPS, IF I DECIDE YOU CAN BE TRUSTED, I WILL EXPLAIN ALL...
FOR NOW, RETURN TO THE TENT AND WAIT FOR ME. THERE ARE MATTERS I MUST ATTEND.
WATCHING HER RECEDE INTO THE SHADOWS OF THE ARBOR LANE, CONAN IS TEMPTED TO FOLLOW AND...
BUT NO.
SHADOWS OR NOT, HE DECIDES THE RISK IS TOO GREAT IN DAYLIGHT.
BEST TO PROLONG THE MASQUE-RADE AND WAIT FOR--
--NIGHTFALL.
YOU'VE RETURNED...
POUR ME SOME WINE, AMRA...
...AND WE SHALL BEGIN TO SEE IF YOU CAN BE TRUSTED.
YOUR BUSINESS IS COMPLETED, THEN?
YES...BUT THERE IS OTHER BUSINESS TO DISCUSS--THE LIFE OR DEATH OF A KING.
TURNING, HE NOTICES THAT ONE OF HER HANDS REMAIN CASUALLY OUT OF SIGHT.
TOO CASUALLY.
OH? AND HOW DO WE GO ABOUT THAT?
FIRST, CONAN...
...I WOULD WORK ON YOU WITH THIS BLADE.
AND AGAIN HE GRUNTS, THIS TIME LOUDLY ENOUGH TO BE HEARD.

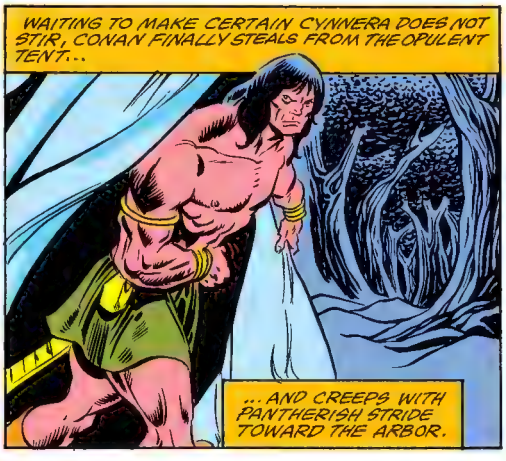

WH--
FEAR NOT, KING CONAN--I WOULD MERELY SHAVE AWAY YOUR BEARD.
AFTER ALL, IT HAS FAILED IN ITS PURPOSE, HAS IT NOT?
VERY WELL--I'LL LET YOU SCRAPE IT OFF...
BUT ONLY WITH HIS HAND EVER ON HER WRIST.
I SAW THE KING BEHIND THE BEARD WHEN YOU WERE FIRST BROUGHT BEFORE ME, CONAN...
AND I KNEW THEN THAT FATE HAD PLAYED STRAIGHT INTO MY HANDS.
AFTER ALL, WHY SHOULD I SETTLE FOR A MERE KINGDOM WHEN I CAN HAVE BOTH THE KINGDOM AND ITS KING? JOIN ME, CONAN, IN A CAUSE FAR GREATER THAN THAT FOR WHICH I WAS CONTRACTED...
SPEAK ON, WOMAN--AS LONG AS YOU DON'T LOP OFF MY EARS, I'LL LISTEN.
YOU ARE A WARRIOR FIRST AND A KING SECOND, CONAN. YOU UNDERSTAND SUCH THINGS AS CONQUEST...
IF THE CAUSE SUITS ME.
THE WORLD, CONAN! THE WORLD HELD IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND!
DOES THAT NOT SUIT YOU?
IT MIGHT. AYE, THERE'S LITTLE ELSE TO TOP IT.
AND FOR YOU, CYNNERA?
I WOULD BE YOUR QUEEN, CONAN--WITH THE WHOLE WORLD AS OUR DOMAIN! ZENOBIA IS TOO WEAK FOR YOU! SHE KNOWS NOTHING OF CONQUEST--AND GROWS WEAKER BY THE DAY IN HER DREAM OF PEACE!
BUT WITH ME YOU'LL HAVE ALL THE QUEEN--ALL THE WOMAN--YOU CAN HANDLE!
THE EARTH WILL SHAKE UNDER OUR LOVEMAKING AND THE HEAVENS WILL TREMBLE UNDER OUR REIGN! JOIN ME IN THIS, CONAN!
JOIN ME IN THE GREATEST ENTERPRISE TWO MORTALS HAVE EVER UNDERTAKEN--HAVE EVER DARED DREAM!


JOIN ME, BEAUTIFUL, STRONG CONAN... IN A PASSION SUCH AS LIFE HAS NEVER BEFORE KNOWN!
SHE LEANS FORWARD WANTONLY, A CURIOUS PENDANT SLIPPING FROM HER BODICE TO DANGLE BEFORE CONAN'S EYES...
AYE, CYNNERA-- I'LL JOIN YOU.


AFTER ALL, I HAVEN'T FELT THE EARTH SHAKE IN DAYS...

HOURS PASS UNDER THE HAUNTING ENCHANTMENT OF MOONLIGHT...


...UNTIL CYNNERA AT LAST SLIPS INTO THE VOID OF SLEEP.
THIS MAKES THE THIRD OF THESE CURSED MEDALLIONS-- AND EVEN IF I DON'T KNOW WHY, I HAVE A FEELING THEY POSSESS SOME KIND OF POWER...
IT MAY HELP, THEN, TO SEPARATE CYNNERA FROM HERS.

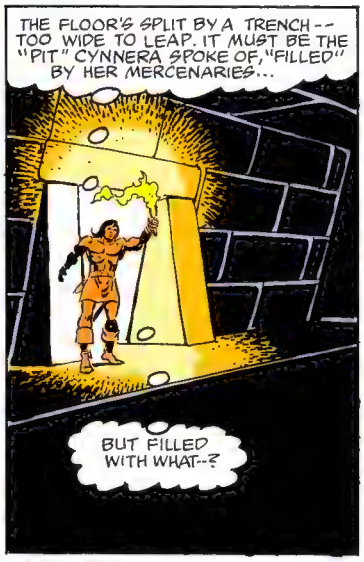

WAITING TO MAKE CERTAIN CYNNERA DOES NOT STIR, CONAN FINALLY STEALS FROM THE OPULENT TENT...
...AND CREEPS WITH PANTHERISH STRIDE TOWARD THE ARBOR.

AS FOR THE REAL THING...
WOULD THAT HE HAD PAID AS MUCH ATTENTION TO THE WOMAN'S PETS.
UHRRR

EH--?

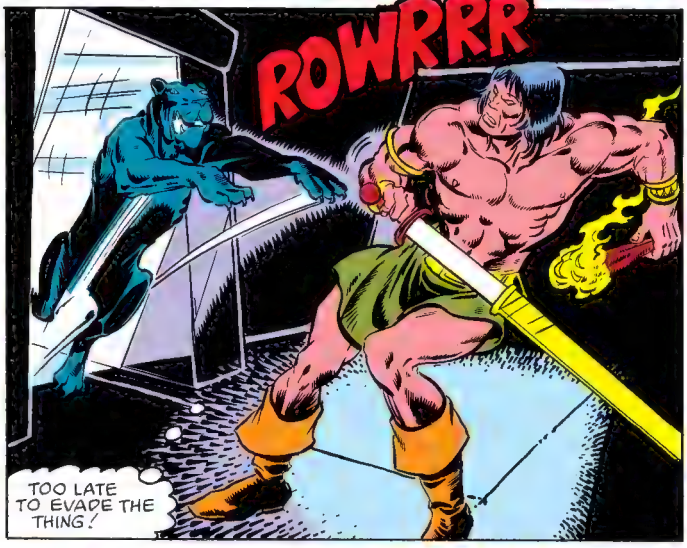
BONES--AS I THOUGHT-- AND HUMAN ONES...BUT AS GRISLY A SIGHT AS IT IS, I SUSPECT THERE'S MORE TO THIS "CENOTAPH" THAN MEETS THE EYES.

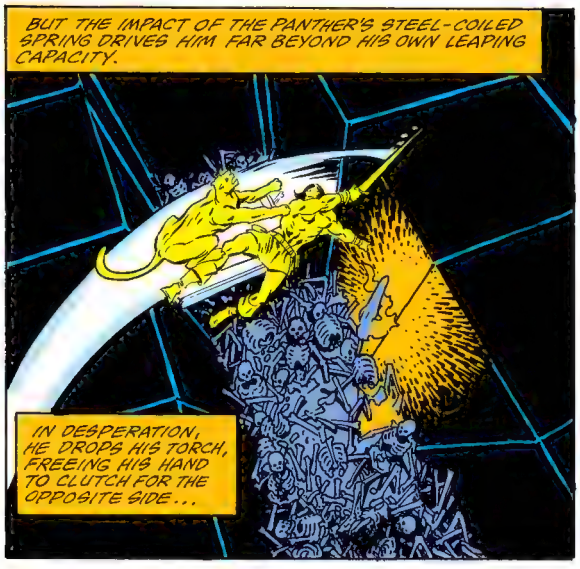
AND IF THERE'S A CLUE TO BE FOUND, NO DOUBT I'LL FIND IT HERE...
...IN THIS TEMPLE--OR TOMB--OR WHATEVER IT IS.

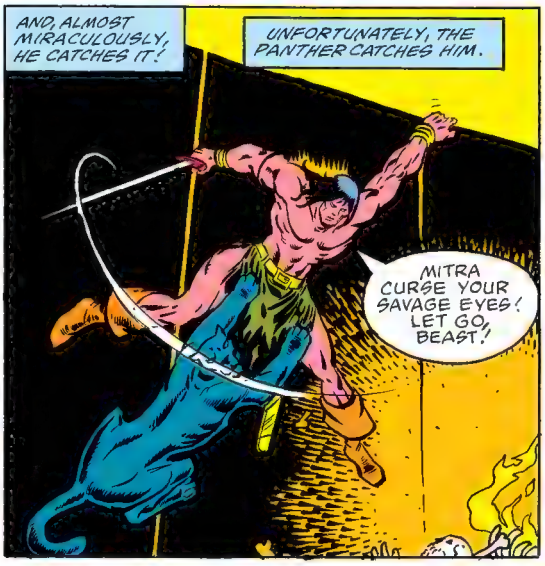

THE FLOOR'S SPLIT BY A TRENCH--TOO WIDE TO LEAP. IT MUST BE THE "PIT" CYNNERA SPOKE OF, "FILLED" BY HER MERCENARIES...
BUT FILLED WITH WHAT--?

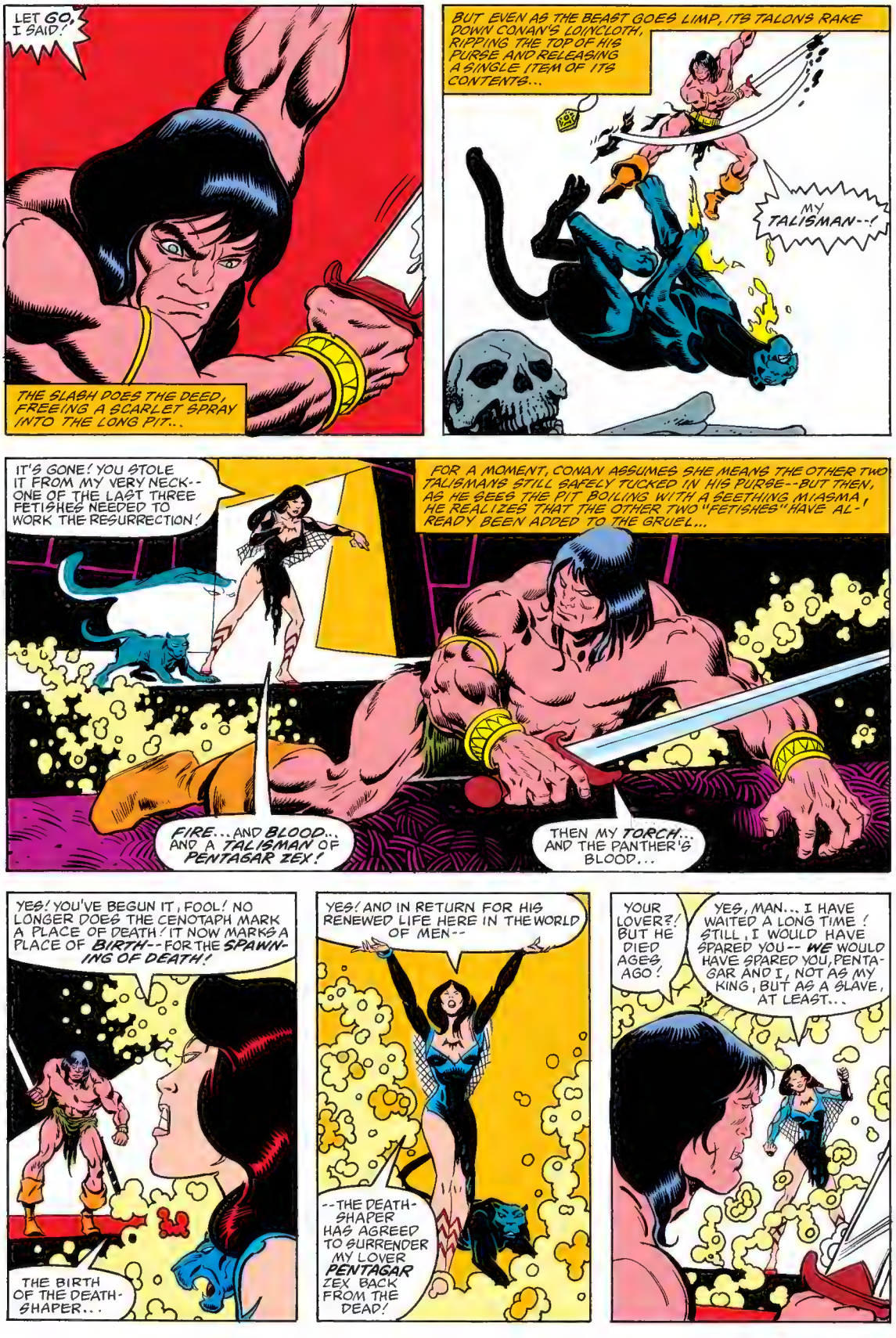
MORE BONES--AYE, WHAT ELSE WOULD IT BE?
LOOKS TO BE MORE THAN THIRTY OR FORTY MEN...

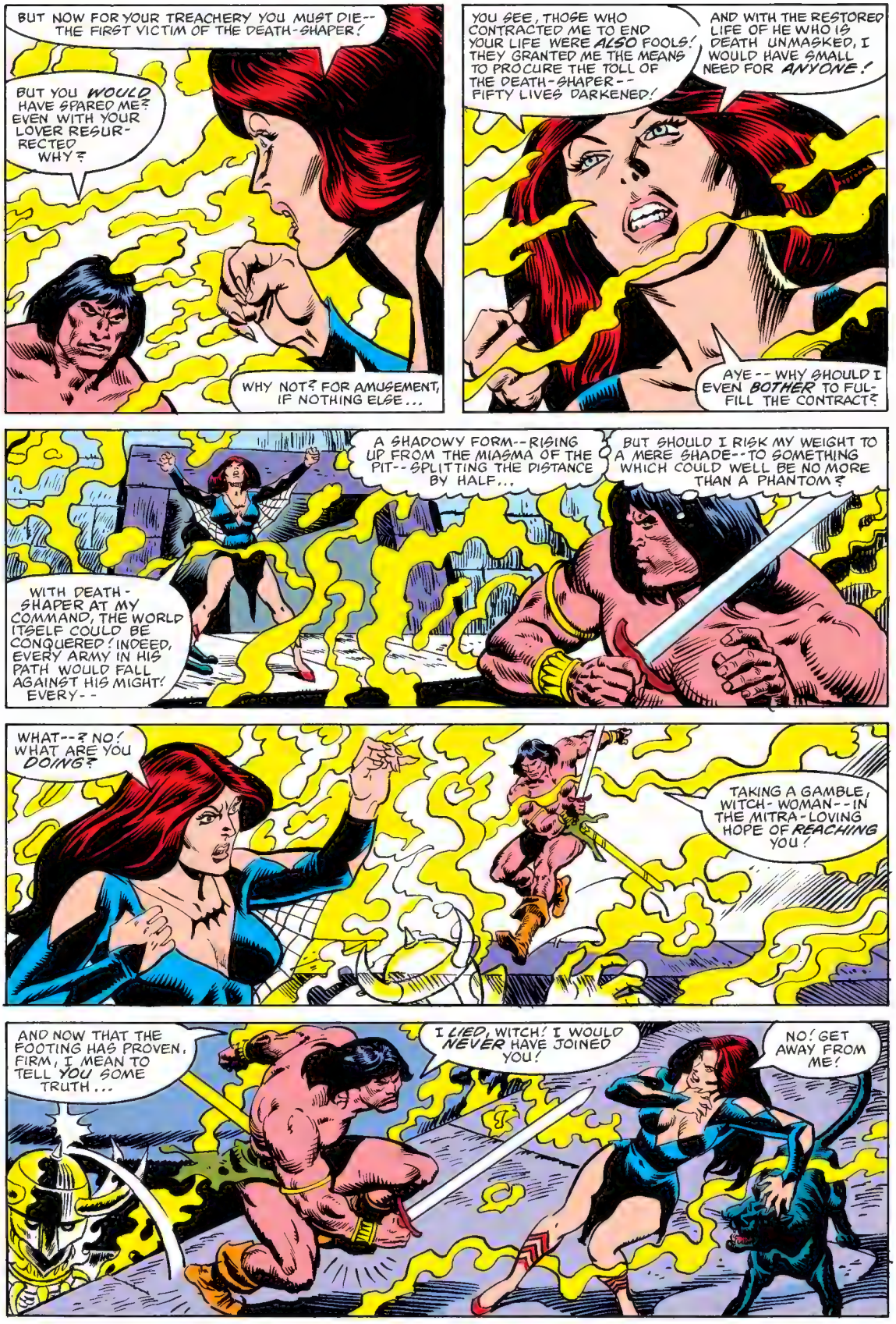
BUT MAYHAP THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE DOWN--
UHRR
CROM! I WASN'T QUIET ENOUGH FOR THE BEASTS!

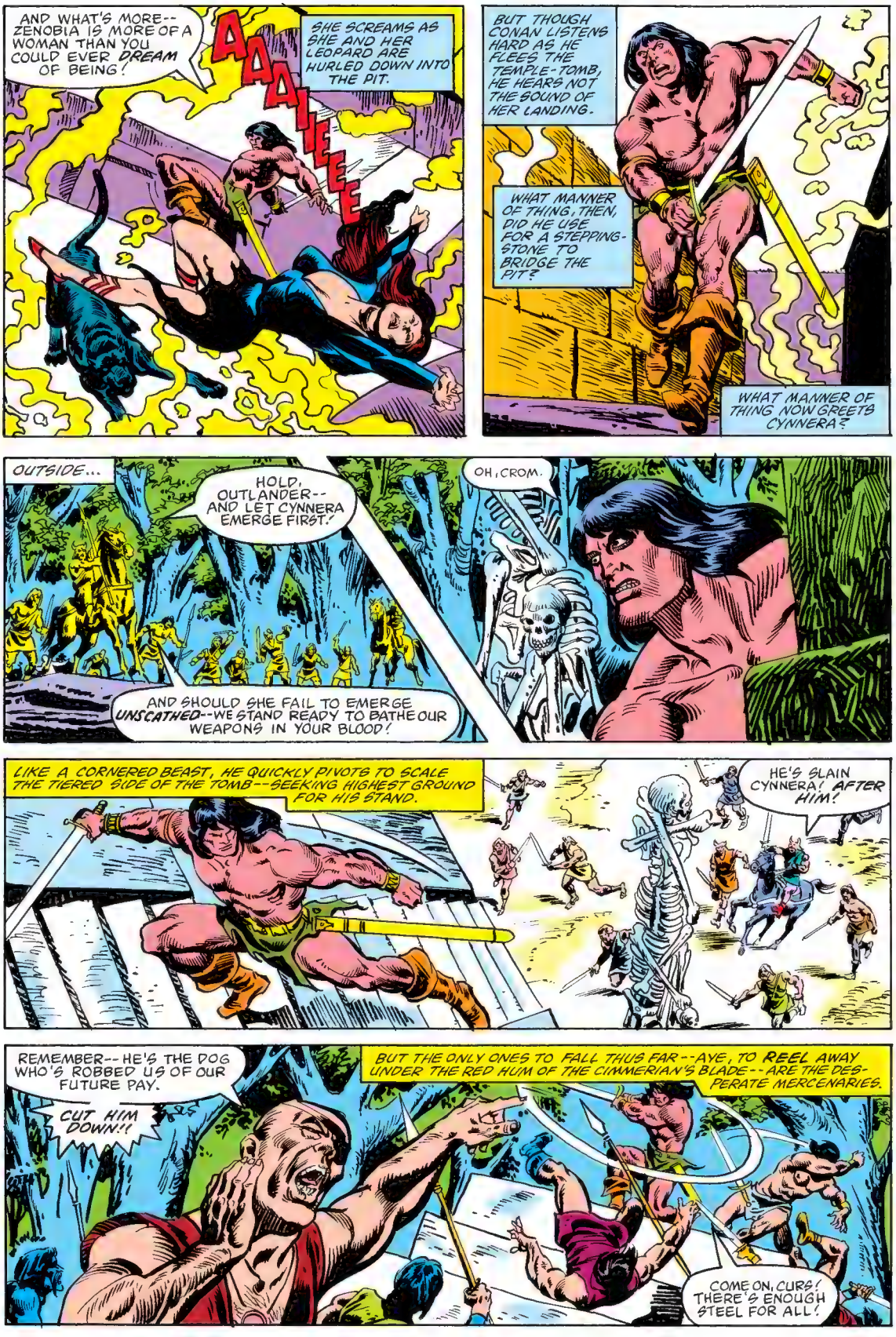

ROWRRR
TOO LATE TO EVADE THE THING!

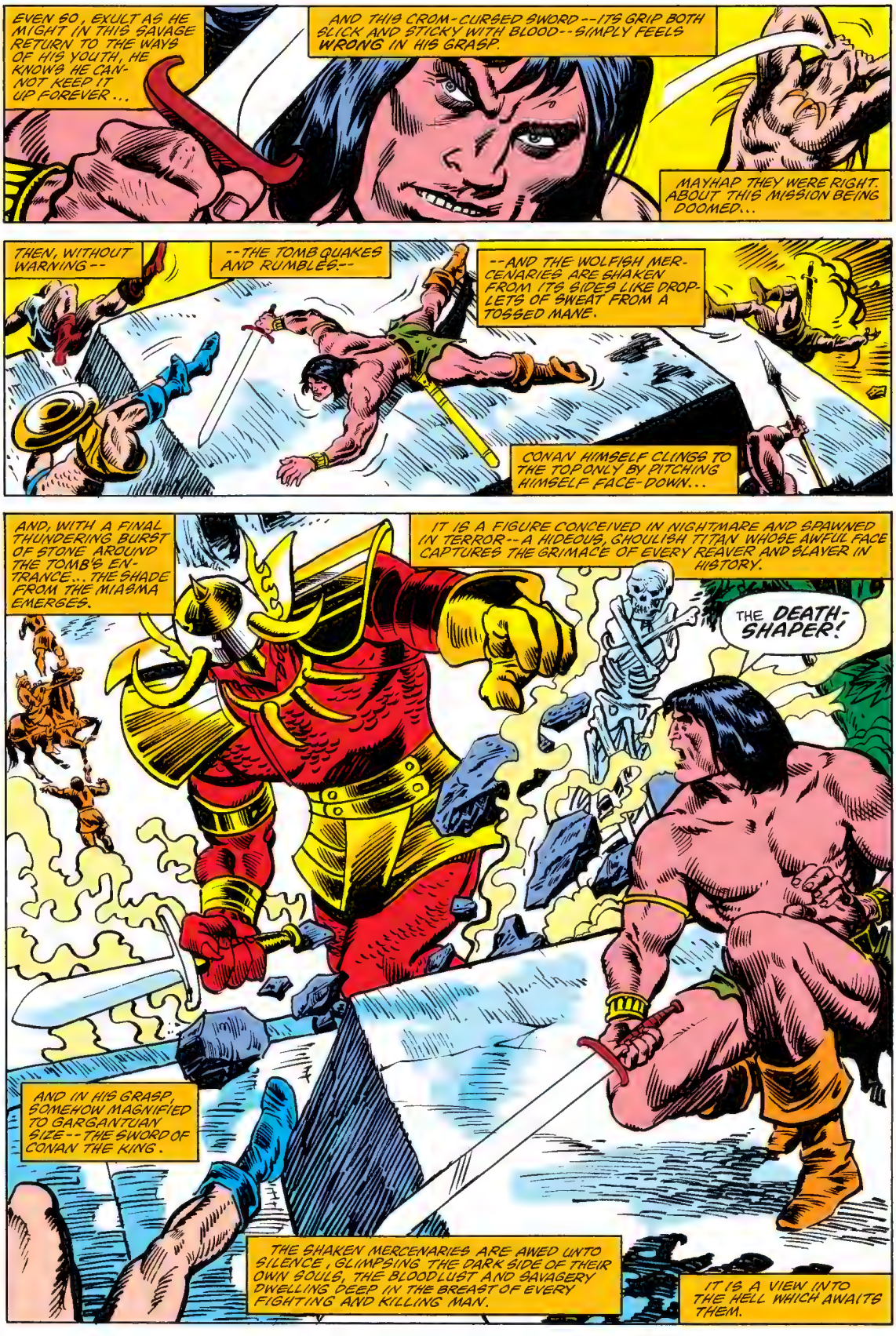

BUT THE IMPACT OF THE PANTHER'S STEEL-COILED SPRING DRIVES HIM FAR BEYOND HIS OWN LEAPING CAPACITY.
IN DESPERATION, HE DROPS HIS TORCH, FREEING HIS HAND TO CLUTCH FOR THE OPPOSITE SIDE...

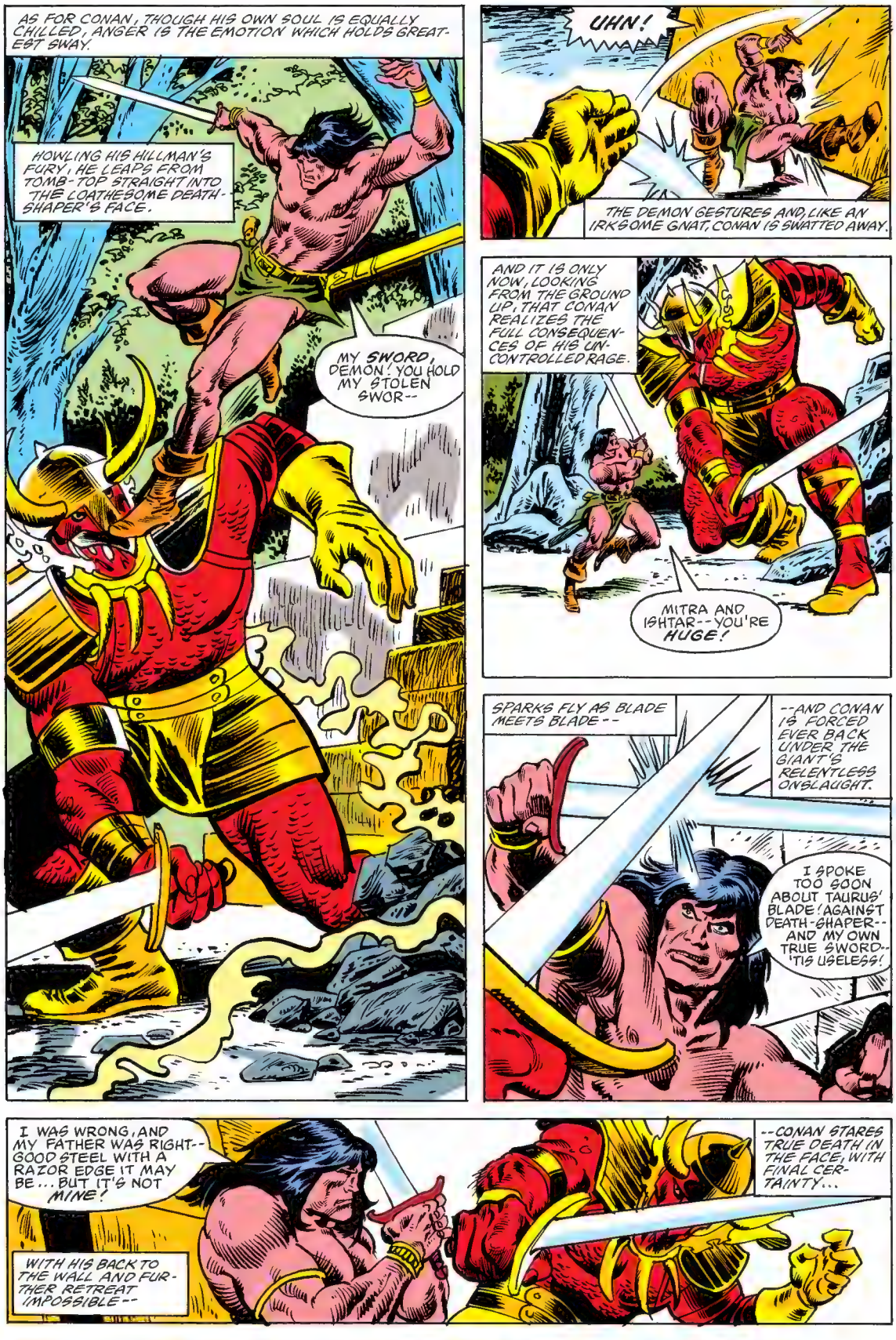

AND, ALMOST MIRACULOUSLY, HE CATCHES IT!
UNFORTUNATELY, THE PANTHER CATCHES HIM.
MITRA CURSE YOUR SAVAGE EYES! LET GO, BEAST!

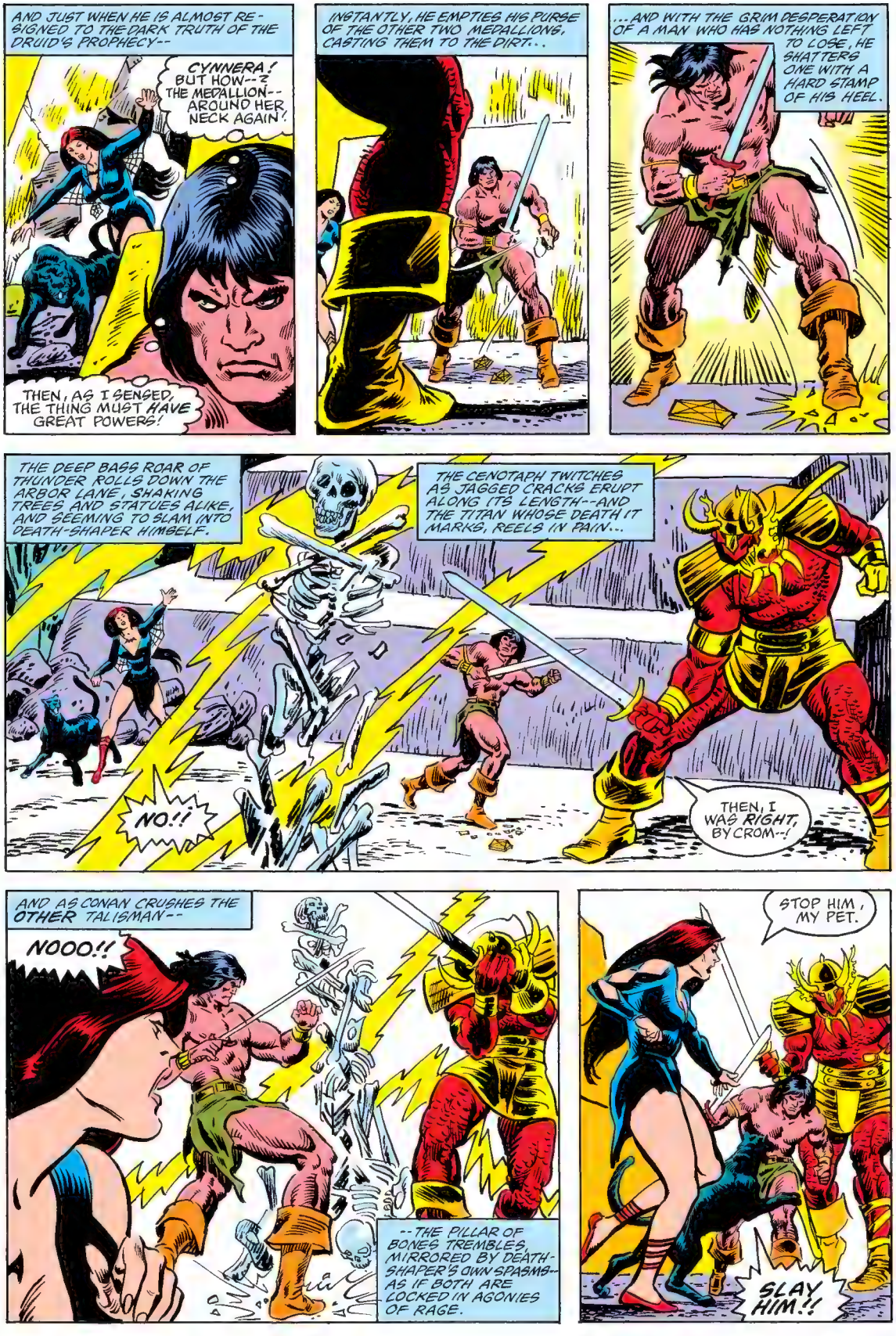

LET GO, I SAID!
THE SLASH DOES THE DEED, FREEING A SCARLET SPRAY INTO THE LONG PIT...
BUT EVEN AS THE BEAST GOES LIMP, ITS TALONS RAKE DOWN CONAN'S LOINCLOTH, RIPPING THE TOP OF HIS PURSE AND RELEASING A SINGLE ITEM OF ITS CONTENTS...
MY TALISMAN--!
IT'S GONE! YOU STOLE IT FROM MY VERY NECK--ONE OF THE LAST THREE FETISHES NEEDED TO WORK THE RESURRECTION!
FOR A MOMENT, CONAN ASSUMES SHE MEANS THE OTHER TWO TALISMANS STILL SAFELY TUCKED IN HIS PURSE--BUT THEN, AS HE SEES THE PIT BOILING WITH A SEETHING MIASMA, HE REALIZES THAT THE OTHER TWO "FETISHES" HAVE ALREADY BEEN ADDED TO THE GRUEL...
FIRE...AND BLOOD... AND A TALISMAN OF PENTAGAR ZEX!
THEN MY TORCH... AND THE PANTHER'S BLOOD...
YES! YOU'VE BEGUN IT, FOOL! NO LONGER DOES THE CENOTAPH MARK A PLACE OF DEATH! IT NOW MARKS A PLACE OF BIRTH--FOR THE SPAWNING OF DEATH!
THE BIRTH OF THE DEATH-SHAPER...
YES! AND IN RETURN FOR HIS RENEWED LIFE HERE IN THE WORLD OF MEN--
--THE DEATH-SHAPER HAS AGREED TO SURRENDER MY LOVER PENTAGAR ZEX BACK FROM THE DEAD!
YOUR LOVER?! BUT HE DIED AGES AGO!
YES, MAN... I HAVE WAITED A LONG TIME! STILL, I WOULD HAVE SPARED YOU-- WE WOULD HAVE SPARED YOU, PENTAGAR AND I, NOT AS MY KING, BUT AS A SLAVE, AT LEAST...


BUT NOW FOR YOUR TREACHERY YOU MUST DIE-- THE FIRST VICTIM OF THE DEATH-SHAPER!
BUT YOU WOULD HAVE SPARED ME? EVEN WITH YOUR LOVER RESURRECTED WHY?
WHY NOT? FOR AMUSEMENT, IF NOTHING ELSE...
YOU SEE, THOSE WHO CONTRACTED ME TO END YOUR LIFE WERE ALSO FOOLS! THEY GRANTED ME THE MEANS TO PROCURE THE TOLL OF THE DEATH-SHAPER-- FIFTY LIVES DARKENED!
AND WITH THE RESTORED LIFE OF HE WHO IS DEATH UNMASKED, I WOULD HAVE SMALL NEED FOR ANYONE!
AYE-- WHY SHOULD I EVEN BOTHER TO FULFILL THE CONTRACT?
A SHADOWY FORM--RISING UP FROM THE MIASMA OF THE PIT--SPLITTING THE DISTANCE BY HALF...
BUT SHOULD I RISK MY WEIGHT TO A MERE SHADE--TO SOMETHING WHICH COULD WELL BE NO MORE THAN A PHANTOM?
WITH DEATH-SHAPER AT MY COMMAND, THE WORLD ITSELF COULD BE CONQUERED! INDEED, EVERY ARMY IN HIS PATH WOULD FALL AGAINST HIS MIGHT! EVERY--
WHAT--? NO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
TAKING A GAMBLE, WITCH-WOMAN--IN THE MITRA-LOVING HOPE OF REACHING YOU!
AND NOW THAT THE FOOTING HAS PROVEN FIRM, I MEAN TO TELL YOU SOME TRUTH...
I LIED, WITCH! I WOULD NEVER HAVE JOINED YOU!
NO! GET AWAY FROM ME!

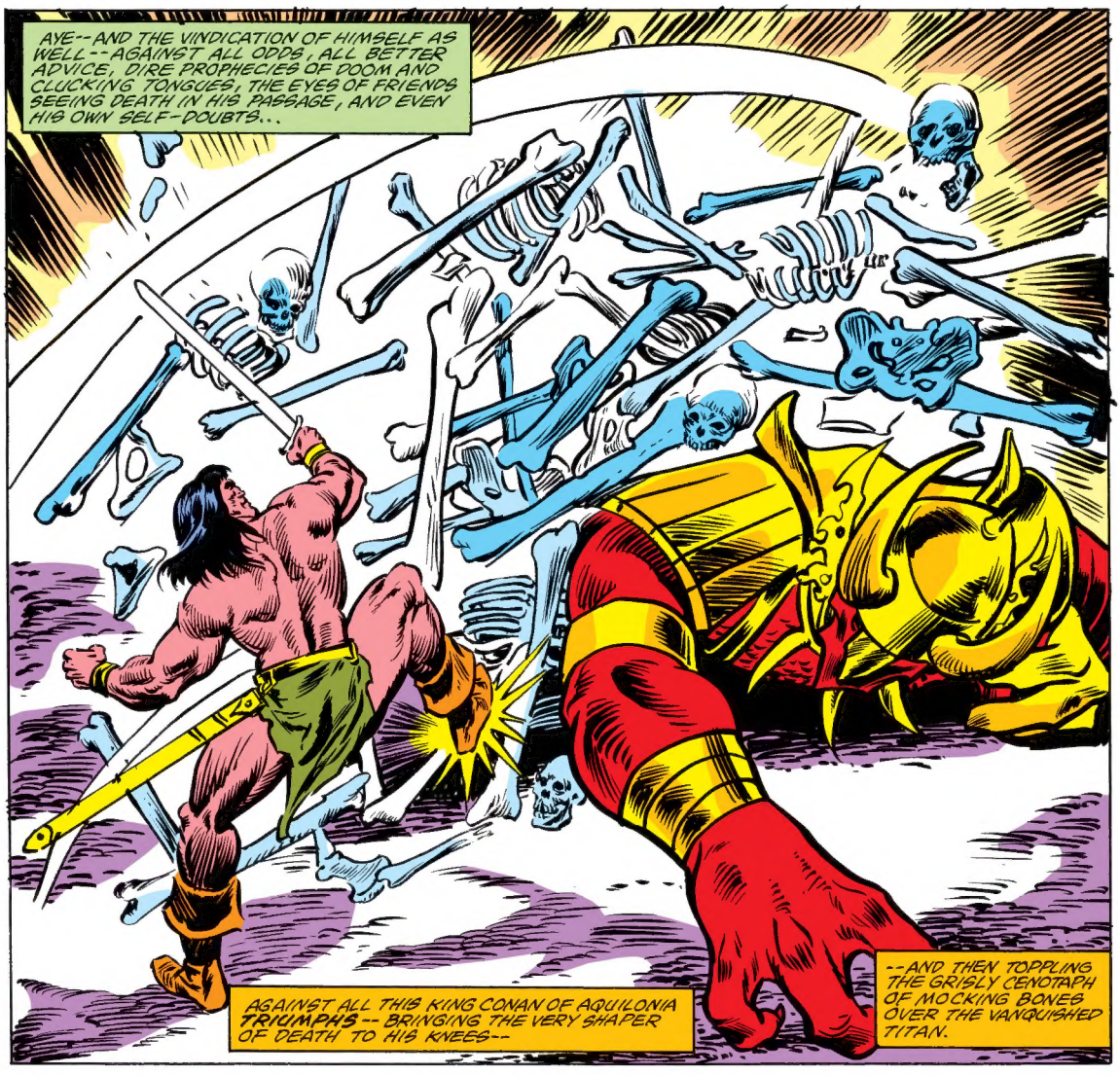

AND WHAT'S MORE--ZENOBIA IS MORE OF A WOMAN THAN YOU COULD EVER DREAM OF BEING!
AAAIEEEE
SHE SCREAMS AS SHE AND HER LEOPARD ARE HURLED DOWN INTO THE PIT.
BUT THOUGH CONAN LISTENS HARD AS HE FLEES THE TEMPLE-TOMB, HE HEARS NOT THE SOUND OF HER LANDING.
WHAT MANNER OF THING, THEN, DID HE USE FOR A STEPPING-STONE TO BRIDGE THE PIT?
WHAT MANNER OF THING NOW GREETS CYNNERA?
OUTSIDE...
HOLD, OUTLANDER--AND LET CYNNERA EMERGE FIRST!
OH, CROM.
AND SHOULD SHE FAIL TO EMERGE UNSCATHED--WE STAND READY TO BATHE OUR WEAPONS IN YOUR BLOOD!
LIKE A CORNERED BEAST, HE QUICKLY PIVOTS TO SCALE THE TIERED SIDE OF THE TOMB--SEEKING HIGHEST GROUND FOR HIS STAND.
HE'S SLAIN CYNNERA! AFTER HIM!
REMEMBER--HE'S THE DOG WHO'S ROBBED US OF OUR FUTURE PAY.
CUT HIM DOWN!!
BUT THE ONLY ONES TO FALL THUS FAR--AYE, TO REEL AWAY UNDER THE RED HUM OF THE CIMMERIAN'S BLADE--ARE THE DESPERATE MERCENARIES.
COME ON, CURS! THERE'S ENOUGH STEEL FOR ALL!


EVEN SO, EXULT AS HE MIGHT IN THIS SAVAGE RETURN TO THE WAYS OF HIS YOUTH, HE KNOWS HE CANNOT KEEP IT UP FOREVER...
AND THIS CROM-CURSED SWORD--ITS GRIP BOTH SLICK AND STICKY WITH BLOOD--SIMPLY FEELS WRONG IN HIS GRASP.
MAYHAP THEY WERE RIGHT. ABOUT THIS MISSION BEING DOOMED...
THEN, WITHOUT WARNING--
--THE TOMB QUAKES AND RUMBLES.--
--AND THE WOLFISH MERCENARIES ARE SHAKEN FROM ITS SIDES LIKE DROPLETS OF SWEAT FROM A TOSSED MANE.
CONAN HIMSELF CLINGS TO THE TOP ONLY BY PITCHING HIMSELF FACE-DOWN...
AND, WITH A FINAL THUNDERING BURST OF STONE AROUND THE TOMB'S ENTRANCE...THE SHADE FROM THE MIASMA EMERGES.
IT IS A FIGURE CONCEIVED IN NIGHTMARE AND SPAWNED IN TERROR--A HIDEOUS, GHOULISH TITAN WHOSE AWFUL FACE CAPTURES THE GRIMACE OF EVERY REAVER AND SLAYER IN HISTORY.
THE DEATH-SHAPER!
AND IN HIS GRASP, SOMEHOW MAGNIFIED TO GARGANTUAN SIZE--THE SWORD OF CONAN THE KING.
THE SHAKEN MERCENARIES ARE AWED UNTO SILENCE, GLIMPSING THE DARK SIDE OF THEIR OWN SOULS, THE BLOODLUST AND SAVAGERY DWELLING DEEP IN THE BREAST OF EVERY FIGHTING AND KILLING MAN.
IT IS A VIEW INTO THE HELL WHICH AWAITS THEM.


AS FOR CONAN, THOUGH HIS OWN SOUL IS EQUALLY CHILLED, ANGER IS THE EMOTION WHICH HOLDS GREATEST SWAY.
HOWLING HIS HILLMAN'S FURY, HE LEAPS FROM TOMB-TOP STRAIGHT INTO THE LOATHESOME DEATH-SHAPER'S FACE.
MY SWORD, DEMON! YOU HOLD MY STOLEN SWOR--
UHN!
THE DEMON GESTURES AND, LIKE AN IRKSOME GNAT, CONAN IS SWATTED AWAY.
AND IT IS ONLY NOW, LOOKING FROM THE GROUND UP, THAT CONAN REALIZES THE FULL CONSEQUENCES OF HIS UNCONTROLLED RAGE.
MITRA AND ISHTAR--YOU'RE HUGE!
SPARKS FLY AS BLADE MEETS BLADE--
--AND CONAN IS FORCED EVER BACK UNDER THE GIANT'S RELENTLESS ONSLAUGHT.
I SPOKE TOO SOON ABOUT TAURUS' BLADE! AGAINST DEATH-SHAPER--AND MY OWN TRUE SWORD--'TIS USELESS!
I WAS WRONG, AND MY FATHER WAS RIGHT--GOOD STEEL WITH A RAZOR EDGE IT MAY BE... BUT IT'S NOT MINE!
WITH HIS BACK TO THE WALL AND FURTHER RETREAT IMPOSSIBLE--
--CONAN STARES TRUE DEATH IN THE FACE, WITH FINAL CERTAINTY...


AND JUST WHEN HE IS ALMOST RE-SIGNED TO THE DARK TRUTH OF THE DRUID'S PROPHECY--
CYNNERA! BUT HOW--? THE MEDALLION--AROUND HER NECK AGAIN!
THEN, AS I SENSED, THE THING MUST HAVE GREAT POWERS!
INSTANTLY, HE EMPTIES HIS PURSE OF THE OTHER TWO MEDALLIONS, CASTING THEM TO THE DIRT...
...AND WITH THE GRIM DESPERATION OF A MAN WHO HAS NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE, HE SHATTERS ONE WITH A HARD STAMP OF HIS HEEL.
THE DEEP BASS ROAR OF THUNDER ROLLS DOWN THE ARBOR LANE, SHAKING TREES AND STATUES ALIKE, AND SEEMING TO SLAM INTO DEATH-SHAPER HIMSELF.
THE CENOTAPH TWITCHES AS JAGGED CRACKS ERUPT ALONG ITS LENGTH--AND THE TITAN WHOSE DEATH IT MARKS, REELS IN PAIN...
NO!!
THEN, I WAS RIGHT, BY CROM--!
AND AS CONAN CRUSHES THE OTHER TALISMAN--
NOOO!!
--THE PILLAR OF BONES TREMBLES, MIRRORED BY DEATH-SHAPER'S OWN SPASMS--AS IF BOTH ARE LOCKED IN AGONIES OF RAGE.
STOP HIM, MY PET.
SLAY HIM!!

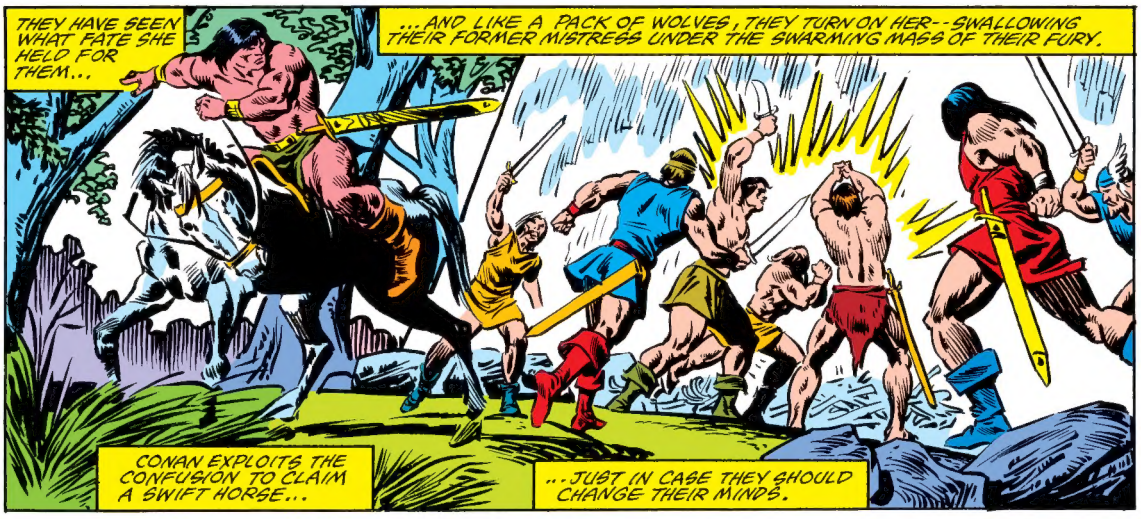
CONAN TURNS HIS BACK, SENSING THAT DEATH-SHAPER HAS BEEN MORTALLY WEAKENED, AND STEELS HIMSELF FOR THE PANTHER'S SPRING...
WHEN IT COMES, HE COLLAPSES TO THE GROUND, ROLLING UNDER THE LUNGING MISSILE OF BUNCHED SINEW--
RAHRR
--SO THAT THE SAVAGE CAT HURTLES ON TO IMPALE ITSELF ON DEATH-SHAPER'S FINAL, AND UNWITTING, DEFENSE.
SHREEEEHHR
EVEN AS IT IS JERKED FROM DEATH-SHAPER'S GRASP, THE SWORD BEGINS TO SHRINK.
AND CONAN DISCARDS THE BLADE OF TAURUS TO PULL HIS OWN FROM THE PANTHER'S BODY. HE REWARDS THE FAMILIAR FEEL BETWEEN HILT AND POMMEL WITH A WOLFISH GRIN.
AND NOW, DEATH-SHAPER... NOW WE SHALL SEE WHOSE BLOOD MISTS THE AIR... AND WHO WILL BE THE FIRST TO DIE!
GOUTS OF FLAME, ECHOING A VISION SEEN ON A HILLSIDE, LEAP AND SPURT FROM EACH FIERCELY DEALT WOUND, AND THE REST IS VINDICATION--
--PROOF OF THE MAGIC FORGED 'TWIXT GOOD STEEL AND HARDENED SINEW...


AYE--AND THE VINDICATION OF HIMSELF AS WELL--AGAINST ALL ODDS, ALL BETTER ADVICE, DIRE PROPHECIES OF DOOM AND CLUCKING TONGUES, THE EYES OF FRIENDS SEEING DEATH IN HIS PASSAGE, AND EVEN HIS OWN SELF-DOUBTS...
AGAINST ALL THIS KING CONAN OF AQUILONIA TRIUMPHS -- BRINGING THE VERY SHAPER OF DEATH TO HIS KNEES--
--AND THEN TOPPLING THE GRISLY CENOTAPH OF MOCKING BONES OVER THE VANQUISHED TITAN.

THE THUNDER STILLS, AND IN THE SUDDEN STILLNESS...THE ONLY SOUND IS THE SLOW SIZZLE AND SPUTTER OF DEATH-SHAPER'S FATAL WOUNDS.
NOW...'TIS A TRUE TOMB.

NO! YOU MEN--YOU'RE MINE! I BOUGHT YOU! DON'T JUST STAND THERE! RUSH HIM--KILL CONAN!
BUT THE MERCENARIES SIMPLY GAPE AT HER...

...AND THEN, WITH EYES AWED BY HIS FEAT, AT CONAN.
CONAN! CONAN! CONAN!
ALLEGIANCE HAS SHIFTED.


THEY HAVE SEEN WHAT FATE SHE HELD FOR THEM...
...AND LIKE A PACK OF WOLVES, THEY TURN ON HER--SWALLOWING THEIR FORMER MISTRESS UNDER THE SWARMING MASS OF THEIR FURY.
CONAN EXPLOITS THE CONFUSION TO CLAIM A SWIFT HORSE...
...JUST IN CASE THEY SHOULD CHANGE THEIR MINDS.

THE LAST THING HE HEARS AS HE THUNDERS DOWN THE ARBOR LANE, AWAY FROM THE FALLEN CENOTAPH--
--IS THE BLOOD FREEZING SHRIEK OF SHE WHO DARED SHAPE THE DEATH-SHAPER.
HE GRUNTS SOFTLY...
TO AQUILONIA, STEED--AND SWIFTLY!

EPILOGUE: THE PALACE FEAST IS SWEET AND SAVORY, BUT THE SWEETEST TASTE OF ALL IS VINDICATION IN THE EYES OF FORMER DOUBTERS.
EVEN THE FORGER TAURUS HAS BEEN INVITED THIS NIGHT...
SO YOU SEE, THE PICT DIVIATIX'S PROPHECY WAS TRUE AFTER ALL.

BUT THE "GREATEST DEATH OF ALL" WAS NOT MINE--NAY, I'M NOT THAT IMPORTANT--RATHER, THE DEATH OF DEATH, OF DEATH-SHAPER HIMSELF--
--HE WHO SURELY WOULD HAVE RULED THE WORLD HAD HE PROSPERED IN BLOOD UNCHECKED.
THEN I SALUTE YOU, CONAN, ONCE AGAIN THE KING KNEW BEST.

I KNEW NOTHING, TROCERO. CROM'S BLOOD, I WAS SCARED WITLESS!
I SIMPLY DECIDED 'TWOULD BE BETTER TO DIE FACING MY ENEMY--THAN COLLAPSE OF FRIGHT ON A COLD THRONE!

NEXT: THE TOMBS UNDER TARANTIA

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Louise, et.al.,

Re: KING CONAN #9. Doug's first outing as a King Conan scripter was very successful. Hopefully, he'll be the regular writer. I do have some script suggestions, though. The scene I remember best in the entire run of this title is a court scene with ladies-in-waiting desperate to get a taste of Conan's lurid past — and he only wants to cozy up with his family. This presented a rarely seen facet of Conan's personality. Now doesn't he have children other than Conn... two daughters, I think it was. Conan as the suspicious father of a pretty daughter could make an interesting springboard for a story.

As for the art — what can I say? John Buscema (how is his name pronouced, by the way ?) is, to my mind, a direct descendent of Leonardo and Michaelangelo. If they had ever drawn comics, I can't halp but suppose their work would have looked like John's work here, especially as it is enhanced by Ernie Chan's inking. And Louise does a good job of putting the whole thing together.

Anything else? Oh, yes! How about more insights into the working bureaucracies of Aquilonia, involving trade negotiations, troops levies, judicial systems, etc. We need to see more of the interaction between Conan and his subjects. Also, Zenobia hasn't been in the book much, except as a maguffin. Please highlight her more in the future. I really like KING CONAN, and I have the highest hopes for it in the future.

Keyes Clark
% King Arthur's Book Shoppe
2336 James
Bellingham, WA 98225

So do we, Keyes, and we're happy to have you on our side. Your suggestions are well thought out — the sort of thing we like to see — and we'll pass them on to Doug, so he can take them under consideration. By the way, Buscema is pronouced "B'you—seh—muh", with the accent on the second syllable. Who says this isn't the Marvel Age Of Instant Orthoepy?

Dear Louise,

KING CONAN #9 was a thoroughly enjoyable issue. You couldn't have chosen a better writer than Doug Moench for KING CONAN. Anyone who remembers his KULL work in BIZARRE ADVENTURES #26 can see what I mean. Doug seems to handle sword-and-sorcery in a much more exciting manner than most writers, and I hope his work will get even better in the future. As for "The Bones Of The Brown Man," I haven't abeen able to find fault with it. Doug has his own style which makes him perfect for Conan.

It's good to see Conn with a major role. His interactions with Akenak tended slightly to the melodramatic, but that passed away by the climax. By the way, I was surprised to see Conan behaving himself with the Picts. Maybe he's mellowing with age.

I don't have to go into a tirade praising John and Ernie. We all know they're tops. I hope they maintain their high standards, as they have in the past.

Leon P. Zivkovic
224 E. 26th St.
Paterson, NJ 07514

Dear Louise,

So this mag is going bi-monthly, eh? That means even *more* pages of Conan adventures to produce each year. What to do? How do you keep KING CONAN disctinct from the other Conan magazines? Of course, there's Conan's age and his kingship. And there's the longer story length (though you have that in SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN, too).

What's the answer? You need look no further than KING CONAN #9. Concentrate on Conn. *He's* the one really big difference between this mag and other Conan books. First, Conn has a unique meaning in Conan's life. In the other mags, Conan has women he cares for and comrades he trusts, but only here does he have a son, a person that he perhaps hopes to shape into a better version of himself (though he has some influence from his mother — as #9 pointed out — which allows us to see a sort of alternate Conan, a sort of "what if Conan were a bit more even-tempered?"). To me, one of Conan's dramatic drawbacks has been his seeming near-omnipotence and rock-steady countenance. Conn is, in a dramatic sense, a more pliable character. I don't want you to change the title of the book to PRINCE CONN, ALSO FEATURING HIS DAD, but continued emphasis on the young warrior is both hoped and called for.

T.M. Maple
Toronto, Ontario

Don't worry about Conn, T.M. He'll continue to be an important part of KING CONAN — but don't get mad if he isn't in every issue. After all, we do have to deal with other characters, like whatsizname... big guy... King something or other...

Dear Louise,

KING CONAN #9 was magnificent in presenting Prince Conn's first solo adventure, even if Conan had to rescue him. The Brown Man Of The River was very eerie and a great creation on the part of Doug and John. So now, how about showing the fates of various Conan companions, such as Zula, over the years?

John Willis
20 Braddock Pk.
Boston, MA 02116

You can bet you'll see various characters from Conan's past popping up now and then, John. We can't promise where or when, so you'll just have to keep reading. Heh, heh. (Ain't we the sneaky ones?)

Dear Marvel,

I stormed the local magazine store and glared down at KING CONAN #9. As I greedily snatched it from the rack, I wondered who was handling the writing chores now. Lo and behold — Doug Moench.

It was the best Conan tale I have read in some months. Doug does terrific things with this character. Hopefully, you can coerce him into doing an occasional story for SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN.

Buscema and Chan did their usual great job. One thing, though: *Please* put a beard on Conan.

Jon Nuquist
29 Bailey Ave.
Montpelier, VT 05602

You mean just walk up to him and paste one on? Good way to lose your hand, Jon. Really, we *do* keep Conan clean-shaven to maintain visual continuity between his three magazines... but that doesn't mean a beard — as the Conan novels describe the King having — is out, even if it's just for a short time, like in this issue.